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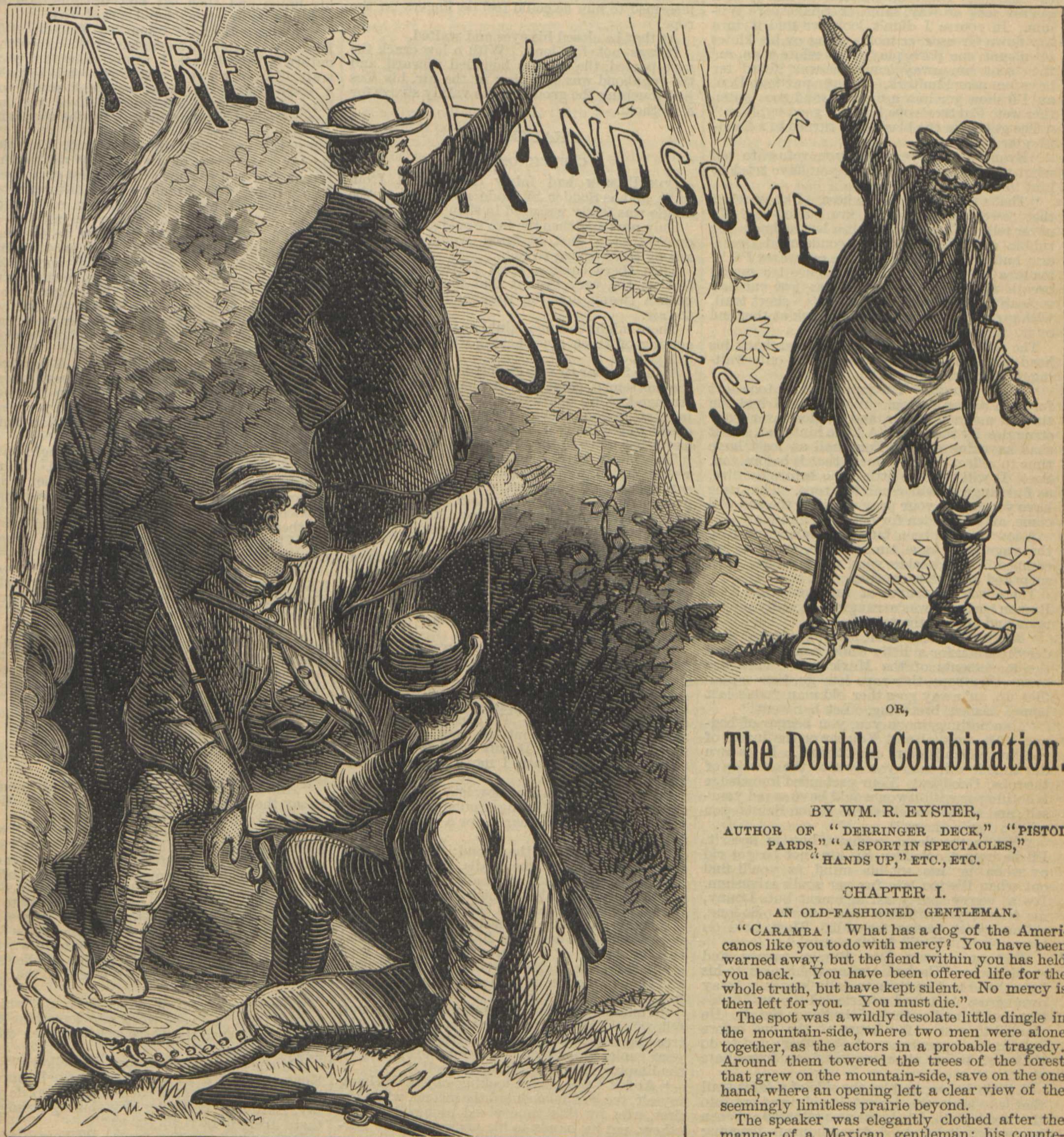
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"SODDER SI AG'IN' THREE HANDSOME SPORTS—AN' SI A-HOLDIN' THER BIG HAND.
GOOD ERNUFF' AN' FAREWELL!"

OR, The Double Combination.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "DERRINGER DECK," "PISTOL
PARDS," "A SPORT IN SPECTACLES,"
"HANDS UP," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN OLD-FASHIONED GENTLEMAN.

"CARAMBIA! What has a dog of the Americans like you to do with mercy? You have been warned away, but the fiend within you has held you back. You have been offered life for the whole truth, but have kept silent. No mercy is then left for you. You must die."

The spot was a wildly desolate little dingle in the mountain-side, where two men were alone together, as the actors in a probable tragedy. Around them towered the trees of the forest that grew on the mountain-side, save on the one hand, where an opening left a clear view of the seemingly limitless prairie beyond.

The speaker was elegantly clothed after the manner of a Mexican gentleman; his countenance in repose would have had a rather handsome appearance, though he was no longer a

young man; and his well-proportioned form betokened both strength and activity.

In fact, Don Ramon Estvan was a man of wealth and importance; and yet, in spite of the smile on his lip, and the cool way in which he uttered his words, the glitter in his midnight eyes told that he meant every word he said—and more.

The person addressed was as widely different as day from night. He was a ragged, tattered, battered, hard-looking customer, square and squat in figure, and his face was covered with a heavy, matted beard. He was evidently of the genus tramp, and looked more worthless than the average. His wrists were bound securely together behind his back, while a rope around his neck was attached to the top of a stout sapling, which had been bent down by an exertion of more force than any one man could have shown.

The sapling was held down to the trunk of the tree against which the tramp was sitting by a secure lashing of ropes, but a slash of the keen saber at Don Ramon's side would release it and swing him up. Only a twist of the wrist, and then the rough-looking man would be squirming in the air.

He took his possible, nay, his probable fate, with an indifference that was almost ludicrous. There was a twinkle in his eye, and not a sign of a quaver in his thickened voice as he answered:

"Don't bu'st yer b'iler, boss; I ain't eggsited, an' there ain't no reason why you sh'd fly off ther handle. I war on'y torkin' ov marcy in a gin'ral sort er way, same ez Shakespeare Willum. In course I didn't look ter find it in a low down Greaser, ez took a gang ov his kiotics ter mount one pore, played-out white man, an' then sent 'em away 'cause he war 'feard ter have 'em hear him tork. Do yer purtiest, Don, an' I'll show yer how a man ov sand goes outen ther wet. Cutther' rope, boss; an' good-by, John!"

The glitter in the black eyes turned to a fiendish glare.

"Even to save your life, you refuse to tell what you know of the matter you have tried to hint to the Donna?"

"That's ther size ov it, ole hoss. I know whar ther jewels an' ther coin are buried—an' I'll never tell. It's tough ter git a last sickness fur rubbin' out only a couple ov condemned Greasers; but ef yer hadn't took me onawares I'd 'a' made a better tally. Thar's no use ter spread breath all over ther perairie, so jest cut ther rope an' let Sodder Si flicker. It's a short trail, with good weather an' lots ov chuck at ther end ov it. Farewell."

The tough-looking citizen dropped back his head, closed his eyes and seemed not only waiting, but willing to depart.

"Right you are. The journey is all too short for such a dog as you. Would that I had the time to make it longer, and to gloat over your struggles by the way. A little hint that, but it shall have due effect. You shall at least have time to reflect on the climate that is before you. See! It will be some little time before the fire, as I arrange it, will reach the rope. That time have you to say your prayers; then the end will come, all too sudden for both you and me."

A low fire had been burning near, started by the vagabond some time before, when he encamped in this desolate spot, where he had been surprised and made captive.

There was no dearth of fuel, and while Don Ramon spoke he was arranging a goodly supply upon and around the ropes.

"Ain't a half-bad idear, boss," suggested Sodder Si; when for a little while, he had watched the movements of the Mexican. "Ther fire burns ther rope, ther rope lets go, ther saplin' flies up, an' away goes ther old man to his last home. Amen, brethring. Let her went!"

"Can nothing move you, you beggar of beggars? Ah, we shall see! You are on the fingers of the fire, which is more cruel than I. In its own due time it will turn you over to the mercies of the rope. Good-by! Your pretended knowledge is nothing or with it you would have saved yourself; and at the Ranch of the Seven Saints you will be seen no more."

"Not in the flesh, perhaps, but in speerit, I'll be 'round. Sodder Si kin not be got rid ov when he hes sot his mind, ez you'll find out when it's too late fur yer soul's salvashun. It's a werry purty arrangement but, Donny, me friend, you'll find it won't work. So long, till me ghost begins ter walk. Then, hold on ter yer ha'r. You'll feel it a-rizin'."

Without answer Don Ramon turned and strode away. He had arranged his plan to his liking, and had no time to dally longer. Away over across the broad prairie led the rail to his own ranch, and to that of the Seven Saints. He wanted to rest a few hours at the one before making his appearance at the other; and to do that and be on time, required an immediate start.

A little below, and by the side of a faint trail that led down the mountain-side and out into the broad plain, his horse was tethered. When he reached it he stood for a moment, listening if by chance he could hear a cry for help, or an appeal for mercy from the man he had left in such deadly peril.

All was silent as the grave in the little dingle he had left behind him.

Then he flung himself into the saddle, and clapping his huge spurs to the side of the mustang he darted away on the trail of his *vaqueros*, whom he had sent away, after the work of capturing the vagabond had been accomplished.

When he had gone the tramp screwed up his mouth in what was a very fair imitation of a comical grin, considering the circumstances.

The fire at his back was burning cheerfully, and it could not be long until the ropes would part, and his elevation follow.

"Lemme see," soliloquized Sodder Si, in an audible tone. "Thar's a chance ther fire won't draw. Then I kin sit hyar till I starve to death, er ther mount'in wolves polish up me bones. Then again thar's a chance ther heft 'll be too much fur ther gallus. In which case me toes 'll jest 'bout tech, an' I'll be strangurlated, in slow time an' more moshuns than yer kin shake a stick at. Gosh! It does me proud ter hev dealin's with sich an' ole-fashioned gentleman! Any way yer fix it thar's no chance ter git out. It's a whollip' pity; but Sodder, yer selected."

He looked around him in a cool, yet inquiring sort of way. The moonlight that drifted into the dingle made the greater part of it light as day. He could see a couple newly-made graves, the nodding trees, the scattered boulders, and away off, through the rift the lonely prairie.

That was all. Hope, there was none, and very quietly now he listened to the crackle of the fire behind him.

The blaze mounted merrily up, and by and by it seemed to him he could feel its fingers on the rope.

At that he closed his eyes and waited.

It was not for long. With a low crack the rope parted, the sapling bounded upward, and the vagabond was swinging in the air, his toes just touching the ground as he vainly strove for a foothold.

CHAPTER II.

A COUNCIL OF THREE.

DON RAMON had fairly disappeared from sight, and as Sodder Si made no sign, the little dingle was fairly wrapped in silence.

Only now and then the fire would give a sharp crackle, or a gust of wind would rustle in among the swaying trees.

Then there came a brisk clatter of horses' feet at the very instant that the rope parted with a twang, and the vagabond shot up into the air.

There might be some faint hope for him, if the coming of those approaching was not too long delayed.

While Sodder Si was giving his first squirm, the horsemen came in plain sight, and rather strange-looking gentlemen were they to be seen in that region, though they would have done credit to the Central Park at New York, or to any other place in the thick of civilization.

They were three handsome young fellows, well mounted, well dressed, and well armed, who sat upon their mustangs with all the ease and grace of accomplished riders, though they looked the furthest removed from the *vaqueros* and cowboys who made up the greater part of the population of that section.

They rode up to the spot where Don Ramon had tethered his horse, and, as if by common consent, looked around in search of a camping-place for the night.

"I smell fresh meat," said one, in a slow, but laughing tone.

"Meat or no meat, there's a wonderful suggestion of smoke," said the second, sniffing suspiciously.

"And where there is smoke, investigation finds fire," tritely remarked the third. "I move we look around. We can't go further to-night, and here's about the spot we want to spread our lay-out. If any one has been kind enough to start a blaze, I move for coffee and hot cakes."

"Well, there's the fire; now let's see if the man that owns it is frolicking around in the under-brush, waiting for a chance for a snap-shot and a big haul."

"Up she rises," said the second; while the third simply swung out of the saddle, threw the reins over the horse's head, and walked upward, taking the very path along which the Mexican had passed but a few moments before.

For this reason he reached the little dingle a few seconds in advance of his friends; and had the first view of a man swinging by a rope around his neck, his toes just clearing the ground, and enough motion in his legs to show that life had not finally departed.

"Thunder and Mars!" exclaimed the young fellow. "This beats the man that climbed the tree and pulled the trunk up after him. Here's your genial proprietor of the camp-fire; and, by the limping Moses, he's hung himself!"

"And if I was such a looking object I'd hang myself, too," supplemented the second, while the first, who, by this time stood alongside of the others, put his hands in his pockets, coolly surveyed the swaying form, and remarked:

"Well, why the thunder don't you cut him down?"

"Done, me lord, at thy behest! Now you've got him keep him. I don't want him."

A swift sweep of a heavy, keen-bladed knife, that missed slicing off Sodder Si's ear by about the breadth of a hair, and the vagabond came, with a thump, to the ground.

He lay there for a few moments, without motion, and apparently without sense.

"Charles, Charles," said the one who had cut him down. "Have you no bowels? There's your gentleman from Jerusalem; bind up his wounds, and let him go on to Jericho!"

"Thank you; I've got plenty of bowels, and a very small supply of whisky—if that is what you mean. But, I suppose I must waste a little of the latter for the sake of humanity. Here. Let me at him. But where, oh, where, do you suppose such a looking object could have come from?"

"Charley Kenyon in the *role* of the good Samaritan," laughed the other. "If you're not mixing sand-burrs in your wool you can call Jim Partridge a prevaricator. There, there. Don't waste the ardent. Blissful result! He revives. Any further application would be pure prodigality, while there are three thirsty throats to which the application more properly belongs. Here. I'll bring up the horses so that he won't be in the range of temptation, and we in the line of loss, and then I'll kick him out."

Partridge meant what he said, too. He had seen the advantages of the spot as a camping-ground, and now ran back to bring up the mustangs, without troubling himself over the fate of the tatterdemalion, who coughed, stretched his limbs, and then sat bolt upright, staring around him in a bewildered sort of way.

"A close call, that," remarked Kenyon. "If I were you, after such evidence of the unhealthy nature of the climate, I would take the back trail till I got where it was worth while to make a fresh start. Anyhow, we don't want you here. If you are sufficiently revived you can now proceed to absquatulate. By the way, who are you, anyhow?"

"Boss," responded the vagabond, his voice thicker than ever, as he ruefully rubbed his throat, "ef you was me you'd do jest ez I does. Ez yer ain't, it don't make a def-a-bitterence ter either you er I, big hog er little pig, root swine er die. Me name are Sodder Si, an' I'm a-travelin'. Ef yer wants a pard ter tie to, what kin expound ther lay ov ther land, an' ther law ov ther prophets, I'm yer man. Ef youthful inexperience wants a safe guide an' mentor, put her right thar, pard, put her right thar! Thankee fur past favors, an' hopin' fur further patronage — couldn't yer pass around ther whisky, boss? I've hed, ez you re-mark, a close call, an' I feel kinder squeamish like."

"Do you want me to brain you? A hundred miles from a barrel, and only a quart among three! If you got your suction on the vial, where would we come in at? How did you come to get in such a snap? Don't suppose you hung yourself."

"Say, boss, I may look like a tough, but I don't reckon I re-semble a durned fool. I ain't hangin' myself while thar's barrels in ther celiar an' money in ther distance. Fact are, a durned Mexican kiote got ther drop on me, unawares, an' then he fixed things up nice, so he did."

"What was it all about? Robbing a hen-roost?"

"Robbin' your gran'mother! Mebbe ye won't b'lieve it, but him an' me are kinder sorter rivals like, an' there's nothin' kin make a brute outer a man like calico."

"A rival! What sort of a looking man can he be? Is that the suit you wear when you go a-courting? Because, if it is, I may as well tell you that I haven't much idea of your chances. Who is the happy lady for whose good graces you are striving?"

"Hush, though I s'pose yer know all 'bout her—most persons does, unfortunately."

The three burst into a simultaneous laugh, then stared at him as though he was some *rara avis*.

"And I suppose you would have cheek enough to say that the first letter of her name was Mercedes? Old man, you are an—an animal."

"That are about ther way they spell it," was the answer, given with a smirk. "I can't say ez there's anything settled yit, but ther keards hev commenced ter come my way. Oh—ah!"

Partridge did not wait for a continuance of the confession. With a strength hardly to be expected from his seemingly light frame, he caught Si by the collar, raised him to his feet with a jerk, and then propelled him down the trail, assisting his progress by the application of his toe where he thought it would do the most good.

He went crashing off down the route, which, by this time, had been worn into something like a path; and then the three looked at each other and again laughed.

"Misfortune makes strange bedfellows," said Kenyon, "but after coming this far I suppose there is no danger of a back-out. What do you say, Buttons? If Sodder Si is shining around is there likely to be room for us?"

Buttons had a better name—William Burton, according to his sponsors—but he answered readily to the *nomme de guerre*.

"What has that tough to do with the bed-rock of facts on which this game is based? A healthy-looking head would he make for the Ranch of the Seven Saints! Fudge! He is no good, as you can see; and perhaps it is a pity that we turned him loose. Anyhow, with the millions in sight, it would be a pretty thing to back out now. See! Away yonder in the moonlight is a speck of shadow! That is our goal; and there we will find the woman with five millions."

"And she is to have her choice," laughed Partridge, throwing himself lazily by the side of the fire that had so nearly been an executioner. "The Donna is lonely and needs a man—a good man—to cheer her solitude, and look after her millions. We offer her Three Handsome Sports to choose from. Any way at all she can't go wrong; and whoever she takes will provide for the rest. She has refused scores already, so she is a woman of sense as well as wealth and beauty, and will undoubtedly take one of us. If she don't we will have had a horridly long jaunt for nothing, and there will be three very badly-sold young men."

"Make her four, pard; make her four! Ain't Sodder Si hyar, workin' on ther same level? Four be honors, an' ther odd trick ter play fur. Count me, too."

A hoarse voice behind them, as they clustered together, made the three spring up and wheel like a flash, with revolvers out and hammers up.

Then Kenyon, as he dropped his hand again, cheerfully exclaimed:

"Pon my soul, it's the dead-beat again. Partridge, he's your meat; finish your job. If he won't stay kicked try lead. I feel it in my bones that if we don't get rid of him he'll prove to be bad medicine."

"Then take me in on ther groun' floor. I'll do me best, an' make a squar' divvy ef I win. Say, sports, I jest heered ov this lay-out be chaintce, 'way up at Phenix, an' I've hoofed it all ther way down, an' got ther game open. Watcher say? I ain't jest so good ter look at, but I'm a holy terror ter stay—ez ther cussed ole Don'll find out afore Sodder Si gits through 'th him. Put it hyar, pard, put it hyar, an' I'll do yer proud."

"What are we to do with him, boys? He knows our cards by name," said Burton thoughtfully. "If he gives any items the canine is defunct, and the combination bu'sted."

"D'yer think I'm *that* kind ov a hair-pin? Ef so yer don't know beans. That's ernuf. Yo've hurt me felinx, an' I won't say another word. One ov yer lend me ther loan ov a six, gimme a snort ov benzine, an' then lemme go. I'll toot a lone horn, an' peddle me own clams."

"Oh, I guess you won't hurt any one; but it's pretty certain you'll never die from softening of the cheek. Here's your red-eye, Charley will lend you a pill-box; and I reckon you'll steal Buttons's nag before morning. So-long, and I hope to glory we won't see you later."

"At ther weddin', pard, at ther weddin'. Yer hev treated me white, an' I give yer all a free invite. Ha, ha! Sodder Si ag'in' Three Handsome Sports—an' Si a-holdin' ther big hand. Good ernurf, an' farewell!"

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and having stuck the revolver he had borrowed in the leg of his boot, he stalked away without further banter or delay.

This time he went; and though the three talked far into the night, he was seen no more.

CHAPTER III.

THE OWNER OF THE MILLIONS.

THE hacienda of the Seven Saints was as widely known, and as frequently spoken of as any other within a hundred miles of it. There were leagues upon leagues of land, thousands of head of cattle and horses, and a roomy, rambling old house, that was almost a fortress. When all the retainers were gathered in nothing short of an army would care to invest the place.

And the happy owner, Donna Mercedes as she was called, was a very handsome woman, and a widow of several years' standing, who managed her affairs with a skill and a courage that had excited a good deal of surprise; and, perhaps, some regret.

Her husband had been a dabbler in plots and politics in his day, had shot and sabered boldly, and been altogether such a bad man, that wealth could not save him. The only wonder was that when the news of his strangulation in due course of justice reached the ranch an order of confiscation did not come along with it.

Donna Mercedes received the intelligence of her husband's demise with seeming unconcern, and immediately began to look after her own interests in a way that he had never done, prospering wonderfully from the moment the reins dropped wholly into her hands.

Since then there had been lovers without stint, but they had all sued in vain, Don Ramon Estvan being at present the only one who had not given up the apparently hopeless task of trying to induce her to once more jump from single-blessedness to double cussedness.

He had more at stake, and could afford to be

more pertinacious. Their estates joined; he was so wealthy himself that one could almost believe it was not for her wealth that he sought her; and as they had always been the best of friends, and there was little time lost in keeping up his suit, it is no wonder the Don did not take no for an answer, but kept up his siege. What view Donna Mercedes took of it was hard to tell, since Ramon, after a preliminary rebuff, had carried on his advances very cautiously, so that, now, at least, he appeared to be on a more friendly footing than ever before. It was Ramon this, and Ramon that; and, meantime, he was very much her slave. Of course she was not expected to know anything about his little private diversions; and if she had he would hardly have shown off to worse advantage than the majority.

The little affair with Sodder Si has been incidentally explained with sufficient clearness to enable the reader to understand it, and from the way he acted it did not seem probable that after consideration would interfere with his slumbers.

In point of fact, he slept so well that he did not waken until long after the hour he had set for rising.

Then he found various things to occupy him, so that he did not set out for the Ranch of the Seven Saints until late in the forenoon.

Before he had gone far he met a *vaquero*, who gave him some information that caused him to turn his mustang's head in a different direction. Donna Mercedes, with a number of her men, had started at an early hour in search of a stray herd, and by chance her intention was to visit the very neighborhood where the Don hoped he had left the swinging corpse of Sodder Si.

As he rode along, his thin lips were tightly compressed, and there was a frown upon his brow; for, cruel as he was, and careless of ordinary consequences to himself, he had very good reasons for not wishing the Donna to see his ghastly handiwork, while there was a chance of tracing it positively to him.

Meantime the lady of the ranch was off on one of her reckless rides. Sweet and tender as she could look, there was a wonderful amount of endurance in her perfectly-formed frame, and in the saddle the maddest *vaquero* that ever thundered over the prairie was not more at home.

Her men were devoted to her, and it was nothing new for Mercedes to take a dozen of them and range the broad plains, or the neighboring mountain-chain, for a week. They had known her so long, and were so thoroughly to be trusted, that with them she felt as safe as within the walls of the Seven Saints.

It was on one of these wild rides that she had set out, on the morning after the opportune arrival of the three young men in the dingle where Don Ramon had been working his wicked will.

She was superbly dressed and mounted, and her face was as free from care as that of any school-girl, as, at the head of a dozen well-mounted and armed retainers, she urged her mustang into a sweeping gallop, and headed for the range of mountains to the north in search of the errant herd.

There was, of course, a spice of danger about these excursions. Wandering Apaches might be on the lookout for a chance to devour; and there were now and then bands of gentle rustlers, and even more pronounced outlaws, ready for a swoop. The little party from the Seven Saints could be seen a long way off, and the Donna had to take her chances with the rest. The nomads of the plains were no respecters of persons.

Perhaps the chance for a brush of that kind added zest to the gallop; and when the excitement of the chase of the lost stock, and a possible find of game something more savage, was added, it is no wonder that the reckless Donna was ready for such a ride whenever her other duties allowed. Without some such outlet she would have found life at the ranch very dull, for, after all, she was a woman among women.

Three men lounging in the dingle let into the mountain-side, where they were waiting for the day to advance so that their advent at the ranch might be coincident with the fall of night, saw the cavalcade in the distance, and shook their heads in a puzzled way.

There was a chance that those approaching might mean no good, and in any event they did not care to be found loitering there in such an aimless way. Strangers in those regions who could give no good account of themselves were always objects of suspicion, and their designs, if really known, would scarcely endear them to the hearts of the community.

"Wonder if it's the worthy Don, coming back to finish up his contract?" thoughtfully queried Partridge. "He seems a man that will hold the field against all comers, and at all hazards, and we've got to buck against him some time or other, but I swear I'd like to have some kind of a footing before the frolic begins. If anything should happen to him now there would be no end of trouble for us. These Mexicans are as bad as so many Corsicans, and have a clearer swing, anyway."

"The hunters hunted!" put in Kenyon, laughing as usual. "You don't seem to take into ac-

count that the chances are pretty largely on the other side. Here are three innocent lads, and yonder a score of men of war. When the armies come together we may go out of the cold. Are we to run the risk by waiting to find out their intentions? are we to shoot when they get within range, or are we to gracefully retire before they have a chance to measure the length of our noses, and observe the direction in which they point?"

"Humbug!" interrupted Burton. "What is the use to cross the river till we get there? Keep your eyes open, and if they look like reasonable creatures we'll treat them right. If they don't we'll let them severely alone till they begin a racket. After that, may the best men win—and we're the best men every time."

Ready then for flight or fight the three awaited the approach of the squadron, without showing any further signs of doubt. They lounged around, smoking their husk cigarettes, and only now and then turning a glance outward toward the plain.

An hour had passed, and the group began to resolve itself into separate figures. Then Kenyon exclaimed:

"Mine by right of discovery, my boys! All Mexico to a hole in the ground that yonder is the fair Mercedes herself. If not, why not? Now comes the chance for an incidental meeting. Couldn't have hit the turn neater if Fate herself had named the cards, and we had wrung in a sanded deck to boot."

"And what in the name of all creation is she doing hereabouts this time in the day? She couldn't be looking for that antique Bezonian, Sodder Si?"

The suggestion of Partridge drew a laugh from the other two, but he did not join in it.

"That looks like a tough suggestion, but that's the kind to make when the bed-rock of truth is to be reached. The Don is no man's fool, and wouldn't be going out of his way to do all that work for nothing. The bummer knows something worth the understanding. The Don wants it; and when we get it we'll be solid with the Donna. We oughtn't have lost sight of him when we had him, but if we follow her I'd be willing to risk coin that her trail will take us straight to him. It's tough to believe but he's the key to the situation. What's your opinion, Buttons?"

"It looks that way. Hanged if the gang hasn't started off one way, while she's coming pretty nearly straight ahead! Eyes open now; there is a chance to begin the campaign with an advantage on our side. Don't show an eye-winker, let alone a hand, until the game is up to the right stage."

Though the party was still some miles away, the three young men were possessed of wonderfully clear eyesight, and in that atmosphere they could readily distinguish the separate forms. That it was a woman that rode fearlessly toward them, was not for a moment a subject of doubt, and the three thought they reasonably well fathomed her purpose.

Unfortunately, the view from the little dingle, though perfect for the vista in the distance, was cut off by the trees that grew up from the mountain-side that lay below them, and before the Donna had pursued her solitary course for a quarter of a mile she vanished from sight.

"Now, then, boys, make up your minds quick," said Partridge, with the nearest approach to excitement he had yet shown. "Are we to run the chances of her finding us in the dingle, here, or had we better swing out and try to run down our game boldly? I'm afraid if we play hide and seek till we can strike on our friend of last night, we'll only get found out; and work of that kind is something a woman never forgives."

"Oh, these anxious lovers!" laughed Kenyon. "They don't know their own minds ten minutes. If that's the way you are going to get off your base I'll feel like backing out before I begin. Ain't I the head-center for the present? Didn't I sing out, 'Fen gougin's' before you lazy rascals laid an eye on her, and isn't it for me to direct the movements of the campaign that just now is in my interest? Here you have it. Listen. You gentlemen are out of the game for the present. You will remain here, keeping out of sight, if possible, but not breaking your necks to avoid being seen. I will prospect on my own hook. For three men to go prowling around would make the whole gang look like marauders. For one man to investigate who was in the neighborhood would only be common prudence. See?"

"I see," answered Burton, "but if you sail off with the Donna what is to become of us poor, miserable sinners? The vial is nearly empty, and the haversack won't hold out another day."

"Oh! I'm not going to forget you. If I find a way to open the heart of the fair dame I'll see that the friends of my bosom are in some way included. Now, shady is the word. I'm off."

"And luck go with you," responded Buttons, while Partridge smiled and lit another cigarette.

"Ahem!" remarked Burton a moment later, as he saw that Kenyon was mounting his mustang. "A beggar on horseback. We had bet-

ter mount and follow. We'll all ride there some time."

"Thanks for the hopeful view, but as this is to be a square deal I prefer letting Charley handle his own papers. You will find him the man for the situation. Keep quiet and see what comes with the opening of the first parallel against the Ranch of the Seven Saints."

They waited a good while without hearing a suspicious sound.

Then, suddenly, away off below, there arose the rattle of a revolver, and then a great shout. The campaign had opened in a way that was startlingly unexpected.

The two listened for an instant, to make sure of the direction of the sounds, and then, hastily springing into the saddle, they dashed madly downward along the trail lately followed by Charley Kenyon.

CHAPTER IV.

A MONARCH FROM THE MOUNTAINS.

CHARLEY KENYON was the life of the scheme the three handsome young sports had formed, and it was right to his taste that to him should fall the lot of making the first move in the near approach. Of course he was not at all foolhardy, and recognized that this dashing widow, from all accounts, was as likely to shoot an unwelcome intruder as to love him.

At the same time he did not intend to go crouching around unless the indications plainly showed that such a course was necessary. He did not take much stock in the suggestion of Partridge in regard to Sodder Si, and certainly had no notion of wasting time on the vagabond when the lady of the Seven Saints was in sight.

Unlike most men, his courage rose as he approached the spot from which it seemed he might catch the first glimpse of Donna Mercedes.

Yet, after all, he had a few sparks of prudence, and as he reached the lower line of timber, and the point from which he could gain a view of the prairie which stretched out and away, he reined in his mustang somewhat and moved forward slowly and more cautiously.

At the first glimpse of the open ground beyond, he saw that there was more than a meeting between a lady and a tramp. Donna Mercedes was there, and so far as any human being, save himself, was concerned, she was alone; but there were plenty of moving figures, though it took him some little time to understand exactly the meaning of what he saw.

The truant herd, or at least a good portion of it, had been found—and something else with it. The cattle, in one compact mass, their heads to the front, and still ready for resistance, though evidently wild with terror, and only kept from stampede because that would bring them closer to the advancing danger, were packed in one corner of a natural opening, which inclosed them as perfectly as the walls of a corral, while slowly shambling toward them was an immense grizzly.

Old Eph had evidently come down from the mountains with the intention of taking the war-path, and at his first opportunity was willing to strike in. The herd was fairly in the toils before his presence was observed; and though instantly standing on guard, remained where it had bunched itself after the first snort of terror.

Lazily, and without fear, the mountain monster rolled forward, apparently unconscious of the eyes that were fixed upon him. He did not watch his intended prey as an animal of the cat kind would have done; but swaggered along, now and then halting to execute a clumsy war-dance, and perform various acrobatic feats, in which he appeared to take a great deal of delight.

This was the situation of affairs as Charley Kenyon first took it in. Then he saw something else that made even his well-tutored nerves tingle.

Straight down upon the monster, from the open prairie a single horsewoman came at racing speed. At a glance he knew that this must be the mistress of the Seven Saints, and none other. At another glance he had an idea that the business of the firm of Kenyon & Co. was in a fair way to come to a sudden ending for want of assets, and he gave a yell of caution and alarm.

It seemed to him that the lady of the ranch must be beside herself; and that the mustang she rode must have gone mad along with her.

Neither evinced the least fear of the shaggy brute, who, as yet, appeared to be unaware of their presence.

"If she does that," cried Kenyon, raising his voice in the excitement of the moment, "Seven Saints, or seventy, won't save her—and she means it, too, the little fool!"

There was no greater admirer of pure grit living, but Charley Kenyon grew wrathful to the very tips of his toes as he saw the Donna swinging over her head a coiled lasso, making ready for the cast.

By some evil chance she had left behind her the repeating rifle she usually carried; and though there was a heavy revolver at her waist she did not care to use it. It was all done in a moment of time. She saw the cowering herd and bruin stalking toward it; and without the slightest hesitation swung the lasso around her

head and urged her mustang on in a sudden and fiery burst of speed.

Yet all the time she herself seemed cool as an iceberg. The noose hurtled through the air, hovered for an instant, and then, true to its aim, settled around the neck of the grizzly, while, with a sudden dextrous turn of her steed she tightened the loop, and by the jerk fairly twisted the monster from its feet.

She had Ephraim; but now the question was, what was she to do with him?

It was just then that Kenyon rode out from under the trees where he had been sheltered, and urged his horse at breakneck speed down a precipitous trail that, in his sober senses, he would have thought twice over before attempting.

"Cut the rope!" he shouted. "Cut the rope, or you are lost!"

Mercedes did not cut the rope, however. With one hand holding steady the mustang, which now, in spite of its training, began to show nervousness, with the other she drew the revolver from her belt.

"Cut the rope before you shoot!" cried Kenyon once more, though too late. Already the weapon had spoken, and the bullet had struck the bear with an unmistakable "spat."

The grizzly did not charge at once, as Kenyon feared. At the sting of the wound he clapped a huge paw to the spot in search of the splinter that had pierced him. When a second ball came, entering at nearly the same place, there was an instantaneous change. With a savage roar the brute darted, open-mouthed, toward the mustang, which as instantly dashed away, in a wild panic.

Unfettered, there might still have been a doubt as to the result of the race. This way, so long as the rope held, it was certain that Eph would not be left, even though all the time the Donna was sending bullet after bullet into his frame.

But the brute was something of a strategist. Suddenly he halted, grasping the lariat between his forepaws, and throwing himself back in a wonderfully human way to catch the shock.

By the narrowest chance the mustang kept its feet, and now the lasso, tightly tied to the horn of her saddle, bound Mercedes to her seat, while, slowly and certainly, the brute reeled in the line with his forepaws, at every vantage gained shambling a step nearer.

Then at last the Donna recognized the temerity of which she had been guilty—and looked in vain for the knife she thought she carried in her belt. No fingers could cast off the lasso. It was a question of very few seconds as to how long horse and rider were to live.

Then came Charley Kenyon, holding his mustang straight with an iron grip of one hand, while with the other he sent shot after shot at the grizzly, in the hope of at least attracting its attention toward himself.

Bruin refused to neglect for an instant the business he had in hand, and never winced to a wound; nor did he even turn his head, as Kenyon raced by within a rod, firing the last shot in his weapon, and then hurling the empty revolver at his head.

Then from his boot Kenyon drew his knife and guiding his mustang up to the side of Mercedes, with one slash severed the taut rope.

At the cut the mustang gave a great side spring; and then, stumbling, cast its fair rider far over its head.

Bruin felt the release also. On the instant the lasso parted he lurched forward with wide-dilated jaws, and was almost at the side of the prostrate Mercedes when Charley Kenyon, knife in hand, dropped fairly on his back.

CHAPTER V.

THE RANCH OF THE SEVEN SAINTS.

For a few moments there was a roar of sounds, a snarling and growling as though a whole menagerie had been turned loose. Then Kenyon sprung lightly away from the beast that was giving its dying flurry, and stood calmly looking on—though he took care to station himself between Mercedes and danger.

The lady had scrambled to her feet and started to flee; but, before she had taken a dozen steps, halted. It was not in her nature to desert any one, even though a stranger, who had put his life in jeopardy for her sake.

A moment before she had thought herself all alone; now, to her surprise, she found herself with plenty of allies.

Here was handsome young Kenyon, who actually seemed to have sprung up out of the ground. Then, coming down over the same course that Kenyon had followed, and to the full as recklessly, were his two friends, while from behind, at some little distance, another man was tearing up to take part in what he could only guess was a conflict of the most desperate kind.

"Safe enough now, miss," said Kenyon, turning to the Donna, as a convulsive quiver ran through the beast. "For a little while, though, I thought we were both elected. I tell you, it don't do to fool around Old Ephraim when he has his war-paint and fixin's on. He means business every time. Excuse me, miss, for speaking my mind so freely. I'm a little off my base. I don't want to intrude."

"No excuses, sir. After what you have done, pray, who has a better right? But for you I would have been lost—and all through my own utter foolishness. It is a fact. I am not to be trusted alone. I ought to have a guardian, I suppose. Yes, my friend, you are too late for the festivities. Had it not been for this gentleman I assure you it is doubtful if you would have found even my bones. Henceforth he is my friend, and I hope you will consider him yours, also."

The latter part of this speech was made to Don Ramon, who had just drawn in his horse, in utter amazement, and some alarm.

"I can never forgive myself," he answered, bowing low in the saddle, his sombrero in his hand. "Truly, if it had not been for this gentleman, as you say, it might have fared hard with you. In your rashness you are willing to do any mad thing, though this is surely the maddest of all. For what he has done for us my house, my lands, my soul are at his disposal. His name—"

"Kenyon, Charley Kenyon," hastily interposed the young man, as the Don hesitated. "And these gentlemen just riding up are the friends of your friend. If they are too late for a hand in the frolic you can rest assured that it is a great regret. William Burton, this, and James Partridge."

The two nodded to the Don and bowed gracefully to the lady. They gave a careless glance at the stiffening body of the grizzly, as though such an unheard-of feat was really nothing more than an every-day affair to them.

"In trouble as usual," said Partridge. "We heard the rattle of your revolver, mixed in with that of another, and some yelling that was lively enough to mean the dickens to pay, so we came up to your help against the mighty. We might have saved ourselves the chance for a broken neck or two. As customary, there was nothing left for us to do when we arrived. Are you ready now, or must we wait for you to make another effort to pass in your checks? You'll succeed some day."

Partridge spoke in a surly sort of way that was not as complimentary to Donna Mercedes as she might have expected. As neither of the three strangers cared to show her more than the most ordinary courtesy, the natural result was that she looked at them a good deal more closely than she would otherwise have done, and really found their faces worth the study.

The three made an interesting picture. They were young, handsome, brave, and neither boastful nor presuming. If looks and manners told all for anything, they were all ready to bow and pass on.

Of course she would not have been a true woman if she had not wanted to see more of such men as these. Voice, looks and manners told them to be worth the cultivating. She looked a little keenly at the two, and then spoke, abruptly:

"If I mistake not you are on your way to the great southern trail. Unless there is urgent haste, the Ranch of the Seven Saints will be glad to receive you as a guest—you and your friends, Senor Kenyon. Indeed, you would be doing us a wrong to leave us without a chance to show our gratitude. Tarry with us at least for the night, and if your time is your own, we will only be too glad to have you extend your visit."

From the Don to the Donna Kenyon looked inquiringly, and Mercedes caught the meaning of the look, answering with a smile:

"How awkward! This is Don Ramon Estvan, a neighbor of mine, and I am Salvador of the Ranch of the Seven Saints. Donna Mercedes is the name they persist in giving me; but to my comrades I would fain be simply Salvador, since now I represent my poor husband and his family. Peace to his soul, it is a mystery to me why I should have been allowed to survive him."

The three bowed together as one man, and then Kenyon answered:

"Mexico, the land of brave men, might produce many Don Salvadors; but if my eyes do not deceive me she could not show another Donna Mercedes. The ways of Providence are not so hard to understand when they are looked at with unprejudiced eyes. As to our time, it is our own; and I confess I would sooner spend the night under the roof of the Seven Saints—of which I will frankly admit I have heard more than once—than upon the prairie. If we will not be counted as intruders I accept the invitation for myself and friends. If I mistake not, yonder come your retainers. Your journey hither was hardly without an object. If in any way we can assist you to it, command our services. They will be freely given."

"A thousand thanks, and if your offer could be put to the test I would not hesitate. But yonder is our aim, and thanks to you, largely, I can go home rejoicing, leaving my *vaqueros* to follow at their leisure. Come, gentlemen, are you ready for a gallop?"

She pointed at the herd, which had not yet recovered from its stupefaction, and then turned to her herdsmen as they came dashing up.

"Truly, Diego, after a manner I had better have taken thy warning, though long would we

have followed the trail that led to the left before we could have found the truants. There has been a brisk piece of work here, as thou canst see, and we now leave it to thy hand to finish it up. Bring in the herd, and the spoils of war as well; and the next time see that I do not have my own way quite so fully. It is more than likely that there will be no gallant knight-errants to stride in to my rescue."

The Mexican whom she addressed was the first of the flight that came tearing up. He glared around him in a bewildered sort of way; and, as though words could not do justice to the occasion, he said nothing.

The Donna did not wait for him to recover his wits. Her mustang, though still showing signs of nervousness, had come back to her, and she turned toward it. If he had not been as prompt as she was quick Kenyon would doubtless have seen her float into the saddle unaided. No one else was ready to move.

She placed her foot on his offered hand with a smile. He scarcely felt its pressure before she was in the saddle, and her steed bounding away.

If her action was intended as a challenge for a race in which she should be away with the advantage she erred in her judgment of the men. Without a sign of effort or flurry the horses of the three Americans dropped into place abreast of her, Kenyon's the nearest, while on the other hand, a neck behind came Don Ramon.

The face of the Don, in spite of the fair words he had spoken, wore a troubled look. He had artfully selected his words—and Mercedes had refused to ratify their meaning. He had not then thought of Kenyon as a possible rival; now his brain was actually full of the idea. He had not only been too late to rescue the lady of the ranch—for which, perhaps, his regrets were not so very poignant—but since then he had twice been placed at a disadvantage. It might seem very trifling that the American should help her into the saddle, and then mount and be off so quickly that he could choose his own station; but it showed the Don what manner of man he had to deal with. If really in earnest the young man with the laughing face and keen knife would be able to make a strong fight.

Thinking of this, and scarcely caring to trust himself in a general conversation the Don rather sullenly kept his place at Mercedes's shoulder.

So far the conversation had been mostly in American. When the Don chose he could drop the idioms of his race very fairly; while the Donna did not use them at all.

After the danger that she had been in Mercedes felt the reaction—and was ready to welcome it. She was gay, happy—almost reckless—while Kenyon was in the best of humors. He almost monopolized the attention of the dashing young widow, while his two friends rode, silent and unconcerned, a few yards to the right.

It was a mad helter-skelter over the plain; but the mustangs were tough and speedy and the riders tireless. As nightfall drew near so did the low rambling building for which they aimed.

Several horsemen dashed out to meet them; but a wave of the hand from the fair Mercedes sent them back, as though understanding the signal; and she and her little cavalcade drew rein at last in front of the open doorway.

"Welcome, senors," said Mercedes, springing lightly to the ground. "Welcome to the ranch of the Seven Saints."

And the three, under circumstances more favorable than they could have dreamed of, followed the senora through the portals.

CHAPTER VI. SPORTS IN COUNCIL.

"Pax robiscum!"

It was a rich, oily voice that uttered the greeting, and Kenyon was wise enough in the ways of the land to understand, even before obtaining a glimpse of him, who was the speaker.

He bowed low and reverently, and responded in his most silken tones:

"Thanks for thy blessing, holy father, and a prayer of thanksgiving for our safe return would not be out of order. Truly, it was more than blind chance that preserved our fair mistress. I, myself, am not altogether unmindful of the mercy that has been shown me. In truth, if we have not had peace we have had victory, which is much the same thing—if not a better."

While he spoke Kenyon was watching narrowly the face of the man before him.

The padre was a dark-visaged man, of perhaps fifty years of age. His face was round, and his lips had a smile about the corners, but there was something in the gleam of his eyes and the firm set of the chin that told Kenyon, without further scrutiny, that the worthy father was a man of strong will, and accustomed to having his own way. As a friend he looked like one who would provide for his own interests first, and as an enemy he would be more than dangerous.

Although the Donna came toward him with a smile on her face, and would have explained the meaning of Kenyon's words it was toward Don Ramon that he looked, after he had taken one eagle glance at the strangers.

The motion was instinctive, and his glance almost instantly came back to Mercedes; but the look was enough to show the three pairs of eyes that were watching him how the land lay.

"Humph!" thought Kenyon. "Easy enough to see where his interests are. We have him to fight, too. If I mistake not, the fair Mercedes is not all that we have to conquer. Between a priest and a woman we are likely to have a harder task than we bargained for. Verily, I am inclined to think the grizzly was the gentlest foe we will have to meet."

Nevertheless, though believing that the padre was committed to the interests of Don Ramon, the three, as if by a common instinct, decided that it would be worth their while to try to make a friend of him, and when, after the first irregular greetings were over, and Mercedes presented them in due form, certainly the good padre, Rocodo, had nothing to complain of in the matter of the cordiality with which his hand was received.

When he heard how deeply the lady of the ranch was indebted to the strangers, he seemed to thaw toward them still more; and they, in turn, were as cordial as though the memory of their first impressions had been totally effaced.

There was some little chattering, but all felt the need of their supper, after the sharp ride of the afternoon. The three were soon led away to the room that had been prepared for them.

Their guide was a handsome, black-eyed girl of eighteen, or thereabouts, who seemed to answer to the name of Luilla. Who the damsel was, or what was her position in the household, had not been explained. From the fact that she had not been formally introduced, it was possible that she was one of the upper servants. From her dress and beauty, and the quiet way in which Mercedes had spoken to her, it was just as probable that she was a relative or a companion.

She said nothing, but motioned them into their room, and then tripped away.

Their baggage, which had been left strapped to their saddles, had been brought in. There was not so much of it, but they made some trifling changes in their dress, and were ready in short order.

Before leaving, however, they gathered for a moment in a little cluster.

"Grand old place this," said Kenyon in a tone but little above a whisper. "Don't see how it has managed to hold together so long. Apaches, rustlers, bandits and bad men around it, thick as—I don't know what."

"Grand o'd place—yes, for spoils, if we were in that line," said Partridge; "but for three honest young men, the opening ain't so good. The Donna is ravishing, I'll admit; but how about the Don? He has eyes that way, and would as soon put a knife into a fellow's back as look at him. And then there's that black-faced Rocodo. He is either backing the Don's game, or he is making a tool of him. Either way we can't throw a stone at one without making the other howl. And, I swear, I'd a heap sooner raid the City of Mexico, single-handed, than take a shy at a single, lone padre, out in the backwoods here. It's not that I have less nerve than the rest, but I'm cursed with such confounded good judgment. How does it strike you, Buttons?"

"You can't win if you don't bet. The worst thing in the way of Charley's chances is the black-eyed little witch, Luilla. I wouldn't be afraid to bet big money that about the time the game is getting interesting Kenyon will be drifting over the border with her in tow. I know the symptoms, and if looks go for anything he's got it bad."

"What? Do you think I'm the sort of man to betray the Donna's confidence? The fair Luilla is as safe with me as though she was in the heart of a nunnery."

"Haven't a doubt of it—and for that reason I figure out the more chance of her becoming Mrs. Kenyon. No use, gentlemen, we might as well make a new throw around, and decide who is to have the next chance."

Very strangely as it would seem, Kenyon did not show as much sign of anger as of confusion. His face flushed, and he gazed up at his friends with a quizzical look.

"For sharp eyes I always did say that Buttons could take the cake. She is a little angel, but—she hasn't the millions. I will even admit that I regret it; but justice must be done to myself and you. I've never jumped a game until my last chip wae played, and I'm not going to begin now. Come on to supper."

"With all my soul," heartily chimed in Partridge. "I am happy to see that everybody here speaks English as though born to it, and I hope they eat after the same fashion. I must say the opening of the campaign has been more favorable than I expected. Forward, brethren, and see that we bring it to a victorious close."

They laughed among themselves, and then left the room in some haste. When they had fairly got out of hearing distance the dark face and heavy figure of Father Rocodo appeared at a hidden door that noiselessly flew open at the further side of the room.

"The vil- Americanos," he muttered to himself. "They have a plot, and had I been upon

the other side of the room I might have heard it all. Maledictions on their whispering! I could make but little out of what reached my ears. The name of Luilla was somehow mixed in with it. Can they suspect? Truly, they and she will be watched; and Mercedes must be brought to understand that these are no mere playthings; but three desperate men full of danger.

"But we will foil them yet; we will foil them yet."

Muttering thus the padre hastily examined their belongings, and then glided away in the wake of the Three Handsome Sports. However he might be troubled by their appearance, he did not intend that his appetite should be the sufferer.

CHAPTER VII. GOING TO THE TRYST.

A RIGHT royal spread was it to which the party at the ranch sat down, and all seemed well pleased with each other. The three had heard a good deal of the profusion and the magnificence at the Ranch of the Seven Saints; but when they looked around them they decided that the half had not been told.

There was the Donna, as brilliant as woman well could be, showing no signs of the danger she had so barely escaped, or of the desperately long ride from which she had just returned. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks had a warm, rich color, her voice was as liquid as ever.

Don Ramon glided into his place as usual, without seeming to intrude; and though he had ridden twice as far within the twenty-four hours, it required the positive knowledge of what had happened on the mountain-side the night before to make the three strangers believe it. He was certainly a man of steel, and likely to prove no mean antagonist when his interests ran counter to theirs. With him came the padre.

Besides these, and the Americans, the only person at the table with them was Luilla.

She spoke but little, and her eyes drooped as if her whole attention was centered on her plate; yet Kenyon, who watched everything, while he kept his tongue wagging whenever there was an opportunity, caught glimpses of the brilliant black orbs that stole a glance now and then at him and his friends.

Once he turned to her, intending to speak, but at that moment her eyes met his, and her taper little forefinger was laid for just an instant on her lips with a significant gesture.

If the girl did not mean silence he was very much mistaken.

He accepted the hint, at any rate, and for an hour never attempted to notice her again.

Mercedes took very kindly to her guests, who were as amusing as three young men who had traveled much, seen a great deal, and were on very good terms with themselves, could be.

Father Rocodo was not the worst company in the world, and even Don Ramon unbent somewhat from the dignity he had assumed. The evening passed rapidly, and probably the hour for separation would have been far later than it was had it not been for Kenyon, who gave his comrades a warning 'glance, and then arose to retire.

This time Luilla did not escort them to their room; but a queer-looking youngster, who darted forward at a movement of the Donna's finger. The lady spoke a few words to him in a low tone; he bobbed his head for answer, and then preceded the three Americans, who followed him without question.

When he had ushered them into their room, he lingered at the door, as if waiting for orders.

"Oh, no, Jehosaphat!" remarked Kenyon, with a smile, looking up. "We have no questions to ask, and no silver to throw away for unreliable information. What we don't understand we'll ask the padre, and what we do we'll say nothing about. Sabe? Now, git!"

The youth manifested conscious guilt, and at the threatening order, removed his presence so speedily that there could be little doubt about his understanding.

"Gentlemen, set it down for an established fact that Jehosaphat—as Charley has named him—understands more lingo than one; and, as this seems to be a house of lingual experts, I would advise due guard over the unruly member that might bring us to grief. Now, Kenyon, what is it?"

Burton's voice was low enough to show that he meant to be guided by his own counsel, yet Charley held up his hand in warning—and to show the bit of paper clasped in his fingers.

"Somebody wake me at midnight; I've got an appointment."

"Whew! that is rushing it. Who with? If it's the fair Mercedes, I'll never put trust in my judgment again."

"Don't trouble yourself about your judgment, my dear. It's luck that we play on. If I don't get stilettoed, I'll tell you the rest when I get back. Now, good-night. Set the alarm at twelve, and we'll see what comes of it."

Kenyon threw himself upon the bed that had been assigned to him, and resolutely closed his eyes. In a few moments he was, to all appearances, sound asleep.

There was no further conversation among the three, but the others followed the example with a success that could only belong to easy consciences.

No one thought of keeping awake, since Kenyon asked for no company, and the peculiarity about his slumber, that he could awaken to the minute of time he had set for himself, rendered the rest easy about him, though they rather expected to be awake themselves.

In that they reckoned without their host, since, when Partridge opened his eyes, he found Burton sleeping peacefully, and Kenyon's couch deserted altogether.

He must have gone out very quietly, since the two were men used to waking at the slightest rustle, and they had closed their eyes with the idea of opening them at midnight.

"Confound it!" thought Partridge, "I ought to be along with him, for there is no knowing into what danger he may be going. But I'm too late now; it would be like hunting a cat in the dark in a strange garret. The only plan is to lie still and wait for a racket."

While he was thinking over the matter Kenyon came gliding back as silently as when he went.

"Been gone long, Charley?" was Partridge's whispered question.

"Long enough to see how the land lays. Our friend, the Don, evidently suspects something and is on the watch outside. Whether he is waiting for Sodder Si or for me I can't just say; but anyhow, he's very uncomfortably much around."

"Then you didn't get a glimpse of your fair enchantress?"

"Who said anything about an enchantress? I saw the party that wrote the note; and, got a hint that some other time would do as well. That's good enough. Now for a square slumber."

He had nothing more to say, and threw himself resolutely down.

The sleep of the three received no interruption, that night; and as all were thoroughly tired, and had not tasted the pleasure of a real bed for weeks the sun was well up before they opened their eyes. They might, even, have slept a good deal later if "Jehoshophat's" knuckles had been softer, or the door given out a less resonant response to their application.

At the reveille Kenyon's hand went under his pillow in search of his revolver. He was not aware of having left orders to be called for any particular train, and any gratuitous efforts he was apt to reward with an exact measurement of the intruder's height. On one or two occasions he had succeeded in creasing the drummer; and had never gone lower. Neither did he make any wild guesses, as the records left on various inn-doors will show.

He remembered where he was in time, gave a yell at the boy, and was ready for breakfast two minutes sooner than his friends, who lost that much time laughing at him.

"We have enjoyed our visit to the Ranch of the Seven Saints immensely," said Kenyon, a couple of hours later, speaking to Mercedes. "I don't know when it was as hard to look duty squarely in the face. But the fact is, if we remain here any length of time we shall be spoiled utterly. I think it is about time for us to go."

The Donna smiled charmingly.

"If you wish to sin beyond forgiveness speak of such a thing again for a week—unless, indeed, you can plead affairs that will suffer beyond remedy. I say a week because my gratitude gives me a right to demand that much. Beyond that, so long as you will remain, you will be my honored, and most welcome guests. Can you not be happy here?"

"Only too happy. It is the void that is to follow which makes me shiver. Once away and *nulla vestigia retrorsum*, our steps will never turn back again. Better to go now, when it may, in time, all seem a dream, than to wait until one can never forget, and be eternally yearning for the vanished."

"Please don't! You put me in mind of Ramon when he tries to be complimentary. Stay. That is enough. You have already done me one great service; if you remain you may have the opportunity to do me another. Meantime, I will make it as pleasant here for you and your comrades as possible, and I think I can promise that you will not die of ennui. How is it to be?"

Kenyon's answer is not hard to guess.

In truth the day slipped away without the three well knowing where it had gone. Even then they had not explored half the internal resources of the ranch; and from a hasty outline it seemed probable that the Donna would provide well for their amusement on the morrow.

"And now," said Kenyon to himself, a few moments before midnight, "I am ready for my adventure. I have not been using my eyes all day for nothing, and as the Don has found it necessary to visit his own ranch, I see nothing in the way. I wonder where Jim is?"

He had discovered that Partridge was missing, but the fact gave him no concern.

Alone, he once more glided away in the darkness, but this time with more assured steps.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MEETING AT MIDNIGHT.

KENYON scarcely knew what to expect. The note might be a *bona-fide* appeal, it might be a test of the loyalty of his intentions, or it might conceal some snare of more or less danger. Of one thing only was he certain.

It had been handed to him by Luilla.

He had, as yet, no idea of losing Mercedes and her millions; though there was a great deal of truth in Burton's suggestion. The black eyes had hit him harder than he was willing to own. He did not believe that the girl would willingly lead him into danger, and he was satisfied to risk a great deal to find out.

Altogether it was beginning to be uncertain whether he exactly enjoyed his position at the front of the race; or that he would force the running if the time came when he had the chance. And yet he did not suspect his own weakness.

It was just as well that he had kept his eyes about him during the day. In spite of the darkness he found his way out of the building, and went straight to the appointed spot, at the foot of the trunk of a huge tree, not a stone's throw from the windows of the room that he and his friends were occupying.

As he drew near he caught a glimpse of a figure, draped in a long cloak, that was waiting for him; but it immediately afterward vanished from sight.

He had seen it with sufficient clearness to know, or to guess, that it belonged to a woman; and was pretty certain that Luilla, if she it was, had shrunk closely to the trunk of the tree.

Still, he went on carefully; and finally halted with his hand on his revolver. He did not intend to be taken off his guard.

For a moment all was silence; then he was no longer in doubt, since some one spoke, and he recognized the tones in an instant.

"Are you certain that you are not followed, senor?"

It was Luilla speaking, and at the sound he sprang forward.

"Hush, not so loud," he whispered. "For myself I do not care, but do not doubt that I will take every care for *your* sake; I have been noiseless as a shadow and care itself; but who can tell what is to happen in and around this strange place?"

"Thanks, a thousand thanks for your confidence. Rest assured that I will never betray it. If you are in trouble, as I believe you are, or need a friend, confide in me. My life itself is always at the service of a woman."

"And how if she needs one to protect her against another woman?"

There was little or nothing of trouble in the tones—they hinted rather at good-natured railery—but Kenyon answered earnestly:

"Then the right must decide. I am willing to stand behind truth wherever I find it from a woman's lips, though I am a good way off from being an angel myself. So that your cause is just I'll back it against the world, no matter which way my own interests point."

"Thank you a thousand times in return; but perhaps you are a great deal wider of the mark than you think for. Who told you, or what made you think, that I was in trouble?"

"It is but a fancy, perhaps, of my own. Why else should you ask for an interview? And with such an equivocal place in the house as you hold, I can believe that life might prove a burden."

"There is more truth in what you say than any confidence I have given you would call for; yet it was not on my account, but on yours, that I wished to see you."

"Mine?"

"Yes. You may suspect, but you can hardly know, that you are in great danger, and I wished to warn you. If you are wise you will not loiter here. Go away, and thank heaven that you have escaped. You still have the chance."

"Indeed? But neither I nor my friends are afraid of any danger, and we love our ease. Where can we find more enjoyment than at the Ranch of the Seven Saints? No; while the worthy hostess allows us to remain, and life goes along like a pleasant dream, why should we trouble ourselves with the world outside? Your warning comes too late. We could not tear ourselves away if we would."

"Foolish man! What is the good-will of Mercedes? She is but a puppet in the hands of those who hate you with a deadly hatred. If you cannot see after that hint, what use would there be to attempt to open your eyes?"

"You are angry with me—yet you should not be. With you away, perhaps I might be willing to see things as you say they are. Just now I do not care. Whatever may happen I am ready for it. If you really want me away, I am only afraid that you have a reason for it; and I will have to stay to find it out. What is it? Certainly you are not afraid to tell, if it is a real warning that you would give me."

Kenyon talked a little at random. The cool laughter had for once got a bit off his base. It seemed possible that Luilla might not care for him, but a great deal for some one to whom

his presence might mean danger. Her words reassured him:

"What have I to fear? I can trust you with the truth. You have made Don Ramon your foe; and he is one to be feared. Back of him is Rocodo, who has been urging the claims of the Don. He has the conscience of our lady under his thumb; and if he thinks that you are likely to interfere with his wishes he will crush you like a fly."

"And what is either of them to you? For the rest I do not care a snap; but in that—"

"Nonsense! Do you imagine that you can deceive either Mercedes or me? We can imagine your errand. You have done my lady a favor for which she is not entirely ungrateful; and though policy and politeness cause her to urge you to stay, in her heart she would be thankful if you would go, before you come to harm. I was not to say so much; but I know it is her real feeling if she but dared to express it. When I tell you that, and that your object in visiting the ranch is entirely hopeless, you should be willing to go."

"Do you mean to say that Donna Mercedes knows of this midnight meeting and deputized you, in this way, to tell us what she dare not say in a plainer? If so, we—stay. There is something wrong at the ranch of the Seven Saints, and our place is here. If Mercedes is in danger so are you, and you both need me and my friends; confide in us, and I swear that you shall not appeal in vain."

"There you go, again! What have I to do with it, and what can you do against a dozen?"

"My dear, I am, comparatively speaking, a young man; but I have had heaps of experience. A dozen men don't frighten me; and if necessary I always hold myself in readiness to fight a town. Bring on your dozen."

"Hush. They are here now. If you dare, remain for a moment to allow me a chance to escape. Then disappear yourself, and remember my warning. Do not use weapons to-night, whatever may happen; and to-morrow take your departure. Good-night."

He stretched out his hand to detain her; but she was gone. He would have told her that safety for her lay in keeping with him; but he could not even hear the rustle of her garments. If he called after her it was more possible that other ears would hear his words, and to follow her in the darkness into which she had vanished was impossible.

At what she had taken alarm he could not decide. He listened but heard no suspicious sounds. When the moment that she requested him to wait had passed he turned toward the ranch.

Before he had taken half a dozen steps a pair of iron arms wrapped around him, he heard the click of a pistol, and a low, gruff voice which muttered:

"Caramba!"

CHAPTER IX.

CRAZY IKE'S BONANZA.

WHILE Kenyon was, in his mind, arranging the programme for the evening Partridge had been considering a few points that had turned up; and had decided that he would run the risk for what he thought he saw in sight.

"Confound it," he muttered to himself, "Charley is holding up his corner after his own style, why shouldn't I? It's just as well to have two strings to a fellow's bow; and it wouldn't hurt to have half a dozen. I don't suppose Jim Partridge can be sold very badly—he has been able to go it alone and take pretty good care of himself since he was knee-high to a duck—and if there should be anything in what the old reprobate hints at I may as well give him a chance to talk. I'll take my time off in the early part of the evening, and Mr. Kenyon can have his later on. I've taken care anyhow that we don't both strike the same rendezvous, and for the balance, we can look out for ourselves."

And that was the reason that when Kenyon woke, to go out, he did not find Partridge; who was at that very moment deep in converse with an odd-looking, shambling sort of a fellow, who was certainly not Mexican by birth, whatever he might be by adoption.

He came stumbling forward after the young man had cooled his heels for full an hour beyond the appointed time; and took the reproaches that greeted him quite coolly.

"Can't help it, boss. Been with yer day afore yesterday ef ther arrival hed arrove; but I hed ter lay off till ther Greasers shut the'r eyes; an' by that time I war sound asleep. Ef it does ye ary good cuss awhile like a house afire an' I'll take a snooze. I'm Crazy Ike, aryhow, an' I takes me own time."

"Crazy Ike? Well, if that don't beat cock-fighting! So I've come out here, at the risk of my brains, to listen to a lunatic. I guess I won't stay any longer. Why didn't you mention your name at the start? I might have loaned you a quarter—and, I'll be hanged if you would have found me here."

"What's ther matter with ther name?" was the answer, sharply given. "An' ther's nothin' beats cock-fightin'. Hood 'em, an' heel 'em, an' weigh 'em in. Bill 'em, an' pit 'em, an' zip! Ther feathers flies. Then ther Dons cheers, an'

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ther senyoreeters clap the'r hands; an' they all say Crazy Ike's ther boss handler ov ther pits. When they're cut to the rattles who kin draw the blood out like him? an' when they're fast who kin handle 'em so gently, ef he does break a leg?"

"No doubt, no doubt; but I didn't come here to listen to a sermon on—"

"Eh? In course not. Yer think yer kim hyar ter reesk yer brains, does yer? Brains? Ha, ha! Why, yer ain't got none."

Philosophic Partridge was about as wise as they make them.

Instead of getting angry he looked keenly at the fellow, trying in spite of the darkness to get a better view of his face and figure. There was a singular ring in the man's voice that he didn't altogether understand.

"Maybe you're Crazy Ike, and perhaps I have no brains; but I reckon we just suit together. Suppose you get down to business, and I'll listen to what you have to say. In the first place, who are you?"

"Now yer talkin'," responded the other, in a totally changed voice. "I'm not as bad as I look. Ef you an' me gets hold ov the drag-rope you'll find we don't make a bad team ter pull together. I'm Ike Dobbs, an' crazy ez a bedbug—in their minds. I look arter ther fowls, an' heel an' fit when Mrs. Mercedes gits up a leetle fly. They think I ain't a-keerin' fur anything else; but Ikey kim down hyar ter hev his eyes open an' you kin gamble on it he's see'd a heap."

"So I should suppose. Now, if you mean to trust me, out with it. If you don't, say so and I'll go back and bunk in. I didn't ask you for any pointers, but you said if I met you here you'd do some talking about the ore in sight. I'm here now, take me or leave me; it don't make much difference which."

"Not ef thar war a million in it?"

"Not if there should be a hundred millions in it. It wouldn't bring in more than board and clothes; and I can make them, anyway."

"Then, what yer hyar at ther ranch fur? That sorter talk sounds big, but it don't fool Crazy Ike; you three fellers are a-nosin' round fur suthin' rich. Mebbe it's fur my strike; but more likely its fur suthin' else. Yer bound ter hev a fout arway; an' I'm jest thunderin' fool enuf ter think ef I kin wring in squar' on the ground floor with yer it'll be jest so much water on my wheel; an' you won't make a bad thing ov it."

For answer Partridge wheeled, and began to stride rapidly away toward the house.

Crazy Ike was after him at once, and with a still more rapid gait. Before Partridge had gone a dozen steps he felt Dobbs pulling at his coat-tail.

"Yer too durned rapid, Mr. Pa'tridge. In course I hed ter see what sorter stuff you war made ov; but ef you'll listen now I'll open up the hull game."

"Drive on with your cattle show; but if you don't crack your whip lively you won't have me here to listen to it. I'm old business, and nothing else."

"That's what I want. I'll give it to yer straight; yer see I've bin hyar a-playin' off on 'em so long, I'll own up thet when I ain't watchin' out me upper story seems kinder shaky. But I've kerrelled knowledge in big chunks. Nobody minded speakin' afore Crazy Ike. Ef he war frum the States, he knew more about fowls than ther fu'st man thet made a heel. I kin hyar a-lookin' fur the Lost Bonanza what I've heared ther boys talkin' 'bout; an' by ther jumpin' Moses I've found it. I dunno, mind yer, ez it'll do me much good, fur ther ain't much show fur honest industry in this hyar section; but ef me an' you three fellers can't work it, we'd better hand in our checks an' give erway ther p'int ter some better man ez kin. Now, ef I lead yer to the spot, will yer all both stan' by me?"

"Isaac, we're the kind of men that make no promises until we see what we're tying ourselves up to. But I'll tell you what I will give you my word on. Show me the lay-out, and if I think there's enough money in it to justify, then I'll give you my word for the gang, and we'll back you for all we're worth, and that's saying a good deal."

"We'll weigh in on them articles, and I'll bet my pile yer show game to ther rattles. Hallelujer! I feel ez though I wanted so bad ter yell that I'd bu'st ef I held in."

"Oh, a little less noise, if you please, and a little more business. Do you want Ramon to come out and cut both our throats? Easy, you old fool, or I'll have to quiet you down."

"Right yer are, though Ramon's jumped the ranch fur the'r night. But when a feller hes bin livin' fur a couple year among the durned Greasers, an' then strikes a white man, yer hain't no idear how it makes him want ter youwl."

"You think nobody has ever been anywhere except yourself. Man alive, if you ever get alone for two months on an iceberg, you'll take kindly to a Digger Injun, let alone a dashing senora like the lady of the Seven Saints. Where's your bonanza at? I'd like to get some sort of idea about the lay of the promised land."

Partridge spoke coldly. The enthusiasm of Crazy Ike was more likely to make him cautious than to warm him up. He was willing to gamble a little as long as he was not certain Dobbs was a lunatic; but he was not going to run too much risk until he saw how the land lay. If he found that Isaac was really off of his base, bonanza or no bonanza, he had no use for him.

"Correct, my noble pard, an' I ain't goin' ter let go until after we've collared ther shekels. I mean it all very square, an' I ain't afeard ter g'in yer a p'inter ez kin set yer straight fur ther happy land ov Canaan. We can't git there ter-night but I kin show yer wharaways it lies; an' we'll figger it out ter git thar soon."

"All right. When you're ready I'm around; and where I go you'll find that my pards are close behind me. They are all solid men to tie to."

"I'm stakin' all I'm wu'th on it. Ef yer give me away Crazy Ike's a dead cock in ther pit. I tell yer, Mr. Pa'tridge, I'm willin' ter put ther hull thing in yer hands, 'thout ary guarantee, jest ter show yer how I kin trust a white man. If yer don't mind er walk ov half a mile, I kin make it wu'th yer while, thar an' back ag'in."

"Half a mile or a dozen, it makes no difference to me. I'm ready for you to show up for all you are worth."

"Kim on, thar; an' don't yer furgit what I'm goin' ter show yer."

Crazy Ike led the way with a long, rolling stride, while the younger man followed him with a strong, springy step, that showed he was no mean pedestrian.

The old man was aiming for a slight elevation, which, crowned with a cluster of trees, seemed like an island of timber in the midst of the plain.

Dobbs would have approached it rashly; but Partridge came to the front, as they neared it.

"Not quite so fast, old man. Use a little more caution, or I shall be compelled to blow you cold on the first appearance of trouble. You may be only careless; but if I should wrongfully suspect you of something else the bonanza would never do you the least bit of good in the world."

"What yer mean? Ain't I to ther front; an' ef arything happens don't I ketch ther fu'st broadside?"

"That may all be very true; but your style of going ahead wouldn't work in our part of the country, and I don't like to try it on here. If you're striking for that *motte*, and can't do better than that I'll try my hand at being guide."

It was some little distance yet to the timber island, and unless they had been seen their approach would not have been noticed by any one concealed from view by the timber, since their conversation had been in low and guarded tones. For the rest of the distance it would have required a keen eye to see them.

Five minutes of time were, perhaps, lost in the guarded approach; but then the wisdom of the younger man was made manifest,

As they halted, just at the outer rim of the timber, they heard the low murmur of voices.

The *motte* was already occupied.

CHAPTER X.

THE PROWL OF THE WOLVES.

THE murmur of voices relieved Partridge of the suspicion that Dobbs had sought to lead him into a trap; but on the other hand it gave him a warning that there was danger about. He held up his hand, and, crouching low, looked around.

Isaac was not as crazy as his name would imply. When his mind was not occupied with chickens or his bonanza he could be as shrewd as any one, and he had had experience by the cord. At the very first breath of sound he had disappeared altogether.

Reassured on his account Partridge began to crawl closer, and soon had obtained a convenient hiding-place, from which he could listen to the conversation which had attracted his attention.

The words fell upon his ears quite clearly now; and the speaker was evidently a Mexican, who was both earnest and reckless, though his English was remarkably pure, the Mexican idiom only appearing at intervals.

"To-night then," he was saying, as Partridge settled into hiding behind the trunks of two adjacent trees, "to-night we will try it. If we fail, perhaps a better chance may come soon. But I cannot wait longer; and if you can never find the right time, I will find it for you. If thou art my friend thou wilt not fail me now."

"Humph! Four Claw very much Don Alfredo's friend. Give um life any time, sure to do good. But Don Ramon him friend too—heap bad friend fall out with. Make Four Claw, even, git up an' howl. Like to take um scalp. Ugh!"

"No, no. See that thou dost not harm him. A bad father has he been, but his blood I would not have to redder my hands. Thou hast deceived him well; and small blame to thee if thou hast more hate than love for the man who calls thee friend. But for him I could afford to wait; but with him at the ranch I dare not show my face there, though I think Mercedes would not be unwilling. When she finds what I have risked, if she be the true woman I think her, she will show no anger. To-night we will win her."

With thy help I will risk all. Hast thou thy braves with thee?"

"Um! Six, ten, half um dozen. Plenty much for snake work; not too many git clean away when job done. If don't make um rifle, an' Ramon find Four Claw in um box, then bring hull tribe, clean ranch all up. Four Claw never let go get him grip shut."

"Call in thy men, then, and let us get nearer to the ranch. A week ago I sent thee word for this meeting, and though all is not as I would have it, I, too, never let go."

Partridge listened to this conversation with more surprise than concern. It was not hard for him to understand the gist of it, and he had at first coolly drawn his revolver, with the intention of removing the interlopers who were planning something that sounded much like an abduction of Mercedes.

Nevertheless, he held his hand; and, at a low, trilling sound uttered by the Indian, was as well satisfied.

In any event he imagined that the ranch, garrisoned as it was, could take care of itself; and he was not so greedy for distinction as to wish for a midnight fight with an indefinite number of Apaches.

While he had no doubt but that he could remove the two men in front of him, it was possible that the dozen or so in the bushes might make it uncomfortably sultry for him immediately thereafter.

"There'll be time enough to shoot when I can't do anything else," he thought; "and meantime, it may be just as well to see what these gentlemen are after. It may give us a hint of what to expect in the future. It appears to me that, hit or miss, Crazy Ike has put us up to a large-sized wrinkle. There they go—straight for the ranch. In their wake follows Mr. Partridge, of course."

The man addressed as Don Alfredo, in company with Four Claw, led the way, while behind them followed a number of dusky forms as noiseless as so many phantoms.

Fortunately Partridge had not struck the *motte* on a direct line from the ranch, but had taken his direction from the spot where he had met Crazy Ike.

This fact relieved him somewhat of the fear he had at first felt that the party might chance to stumble over his guide, whom he supposed to be somewhere hidden behind him.

Still, he waited in some suspense until the party had passed the spot where Dobbs had been at the time the presence of Alfredo and his allies had been discovered.

There was no alarm, and Partridge set out to follow, being pretty certain that Ike would provide for his own safety.

The men advanced slowly and silently, but with the confidence of those who knew the land and had no fears if they used ordinary caution. Partridge was well aware that there were herdsmen patrolling the plain around the ranch all through the night, and if he had been compelled to find his own way in he would have felt pretty certain of meeting them, unless chance would be as good to him going in as Crazy Ike was coming out. The men in front were as good as a guide, and as he expected to give them a waking up before he got through, he chuckled over the joke.

Their progress was slow but sure, and as they neared the ranch, to the surprise of Partridge, well-versed as he was in Indian wiles, the whole party disappeared as though they were phantoms and had sunk into the ground.

"Of course," thought Partridge, "they are no slouches, and I'll have my hands full if I don't want to get in a day after the fair. If I go too fast I may run into a snag, and if I frolic around on the outside they'll be off and gone. Pshaw! If I strike 'em, I'll let 'em have it for all I'm worth, and that will settle it. Can't have any outsiders poaching on our preserves. Here goes."

He was crouching low; now he raised fearlessly and ran lightly forward.

The result was that he came in contact with a human body that stretched out across his path.

He went headlong, but was on his feet in a moment, with a ready revolver in his hand. The thought that he had stumbled against Crazy Ike caused him to refrain from firing, and if it had been an enemy that he had struck, he would have stood a good chance of being taken in while hesitating.

"Land ov Goshen, stranger, whar yer pushin'? Ef I warn't ther best-nat'red cuss a-livin' I'd be takin' yer sculp fur sich durned keerless goin's on. But I know yer an' yer game, an' kin make a allowance fur a anxious lovyer. Hold yer whist now an' kin along with Sodder Si, ef yer wants ter see fun."

Though at the first sound of that husky whisper Partridge thought that Dobbs had come back he recognized the bummer whom they had found in such a ticklish position a couple of nights before, even before he announced his name.

As honors were about even between the two Partridge was not inclined to feel alarmed at the meeting, though he could not account for the presence of Si, at such a place and hour, and there was small time to question him.

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"Are you for those outside or inside? Speak quick, and remember that you're talking against the muzzle of a revolver."

"Durn fine way, that, ter get at ther truth. But I kin say I'm fur Sodder Si, all ther time, an' ef I ain't mistook that puts me ter backin' ther Donner's game ter-night. How et will be by ther mornin' I can't say. It's astonishin' how quick a feller's eenterests kin change. But I'm 'round hyar now, an' ef yer wants a shy at them roosters ez thinks they're goin' ter make a ten-strike, foller me lead. Ef yer afraid, stan' back an' see how Sodder Si kin work ther racket."

The old fellow seemed to be in earnest, but in no haste; and Partridge only hesitated for a moment. He had reason to believe that Si was better acquainted with the lay of things than he was, and he had seen enough of the veteran under fire to have a great respect for his nerve. He finally answered:

"Lead on, if you mean it; but don't you forget that at the first sign of treachery you are a dead man."

"Thankee, boss; an' ef I don't give yer enuf work ter make ye furgit Sodder Si I'm liar enuf ter fool myself. This ain't goin' ter be no lam's play but a rale ole wrastle with ther wolves ov ther mountings."

His hand was lying on Partridge's arm; now it tightened and gave a tug and then silently the old man turned away. He was ready at least to advance—though what he had been waiting for, unless to finish making conditions with him, the other did not see.

Of course there was no need to caution him to go quietly. Partridge understood the situation well enough. Alfredo and his Indian allies were approaching the ranch, but it was not certain what progress they had made, and the least imprudence might precipitate a struggle with them with the odds all the wrong way.

As they advanced Partridge's nerves seemed strung to their utmost tension, and it was a terrible start to suddenly hear the lightest of footsteps, followed by a faint whispering and then the sound of a smothered oath. At last some one was near—almost within arm's reach.

The fact was, that under the guidance of Sodder Si, Partridge had come to the trysting-tree where Charley Kenyon had been holding his consultation with Luilla. After the oath came the sounds made by a pair of fierce combatants, each of whom, strangely enough as it seemed, was determined that no sound should escape either his own lips or those of his antagonist.

That fact gave to Partridge the clew.

"Hold hard, Si," he exclaimed, not so loudly that his voice would reach any distance. "I've a friend in that mix. Just stand back a moment while he gives an account of himself. If we strike in there we'll hit the wrong man sure."

"Friend ov yourn, eh! Blamed ef I didn't think it war one ov ther Three Handsome Sports by ther way he seems ter keep his jaw shut, an' handle hisself. Thar's a heap ov sense 'bout yer silent fighters. Let's take a rest till we see which whips."

Sodder Si sat down quite coolly, but he was not watching the fight at all, of which nothing but the haziest of outlines could be seen. His face was turned in just the opposite direction. If any fresh spectators should arrive he would have an elegant chance to catch them on the fly.

He scarcely looked around at the sound of a heavy fall; nor when a voice which he could hardly recognize as that of laughing Kenyon, ground out, in a savage whisper:

"That settles you, my worthy friend, but now that I've got you I swear I don't know what to do with you. If the festive Ramon turns up here in the morning, as a cold corpus, it would make mighty interesting reading in the morning papers; but it wouldn't help my hand for a cent. And if I let him go there's no telling what he will have to say about it; besides being ready to pick his flint and try it again the first chance he gets. There's only two chances, and he has 'em both."

"Good for you, Charley; you got the turn with a vengeance. Only, don't fret yourself about the Don. This ain't his night on. Let me help you tie this rooster's legs together, and then we'll go on to the house. There are hawks abroad and this is only the first flight. Lucky we were on the watch, and it's not sure that we won't hear sounds from home yet, before we get through."

"Hallelujah! That's you, is it, Partridge? I've got him safe enough; now tell me quick, what's in the wind?"

"No time fur talk," interrupted the hoarse voice of Sodder Si, who no longer affected caution. "Ther crawlin' snakes is gittin' in their work fine, they've stole a march, an' left this hyar coon fur a bait. Kim along. Thar's red work ter be did, furder on."

They left the man where Kenyon had flung him, and bounded toward the ranch; but as they sprung forward they heard a single scream from a woman's lips, and then the trampling of feet.

"Cusses on it," ground out Sodder Si. "We

dassn't shoot! Give em 'the knife boys, for all its wu'th, an' ez deep ez it'll go!"

As he spoke there rung out the report of a pistol.

CHAPTER XI.

BURTON CHIPS ON THE QUEEN.

WHEN Burton woke up and found himself alone in the room he did not feel the least concern over the absence of his partners. They were both of age and were supposed to be able to take care of themselves. If he could have had his own way he would have turned over and gone to sleep again.

Unfortunately, as it seemed, sleep would not come, and, for the next five or ten minutes, he had never been more thoroughly awake.

Feeling thus, he got up, threw on his clothes and lounged to the window. He was just about to light a cigarette with his flint and fuse when something stayed his hand. He put away the utensils, touched the butt of his revolver mechanically, and looked keenly out into the darkness.

He had sharp eyes and felt certain that he was not deceived. Some one was running fleetly toward the building, and that some one was a woman.

"Master Charley must have been specially powerful in his love-making to-night," he muttered. "She found she would have to either yield or run, and she's doing the last as though she meant it. If she had been a minute later she would have seen a spark in the window and sworn that Kenyon had given the whole thing away.

"Ah!"

His lounging indifference changed like a flash.

Right up in the path of the fugitive started a dark figure that sprung toward her. In an instant she was wrenched from the ground and was being borne away.

Burton's thumb was on the hammer, and finger on the trigger of his revolver even before the scream pealed out on the night air; but he feared to fire. In that uncertain light he was more than likely to hit just where he least wanted his bullet to go.

Then he saw his chance when other figures rose from the ground. He fired one shot, and then vaulted out, as a man went crashing down.

Burton was fleet of foot as a deer, and had little doubt of being able to overtake the fugitives, burdened as they were. Holding his weapon ready in his hand he ran on.

That one scream was not followed by any more, but he had the running figures in view, and was little afraid of being thrown off the trail.

He was wide awake for all stratagems, too, and gave a great spring in the air as the nearest of the runaways dropped on hands and knees, just in the track in front of him.

The spring carried him well over the cunning brave, and as he went he fired a single shot downward. Then he ran on again. At such close quarters there was no use to look whether his shot had taken effect. The pull of the trigger meant certain death.

He had no doubt but that if he fired now he would kill one; the only trouble was that he might kill two. That still held his hand until he could see more clearly what he was doing. Then he gave a great cry of delight as he saw the man go down, his burden springing lightly from his arms. Also, to his surprise, he recognized the voice of Sodder Si.

"Ef yer got him, keep him, an' I'll kiver ther captive's retreat. Thar'll soon be help ernuf hyar, an' ther rest ov ther gang won't hev sand ernuf ter git inter sich ticklish quarters. Tell yer, we've scooped ther bosses, an' ther ruff-scuff'll run like a house afire."

"Oh, I've got him, sure enough. If his ankles don't break, I'll swear my gripe won't give out; but you'd better put that knife you were talking about into him to keep him quiet. A dead Injun is a good Injun, and I'm mighty anxious to see this one reformed."

"Not ef this court knows herself. Wouldn't hev Four Claw's blood on me head—not fur Crazy Ike's bonanzier. When ther daisy gits inter safety, gi'n him a kick an' let him go. I think she's jest about safe now."

"Kicked he is," answered Kenyon, calmly; "but I've an idea that it would be safer to massacre half the tribe. He wouldn't have half so many with him when he comes back to get even. Get out of this, red-skin; we haven't a bit of use for you here."

It was Four Claw that Kenyon had captured by dexterously seizing him by the ankles. While the conversation had been going on, Charley had held the chief down, as though he was an infant, a knee grinding into the small of his back, and his wrists twisted behind him and held in a gripe of iron. Now the young man rose to his feet, lifting the chief with as little concern as if he was an infant, and giving a fling, threw him into a standing posture.

Whatever vengeful feelings Four Claw may have cherished, he did not take time to express them; but the moment his feet touched the ground he muttered a grunt of surprise, and then bounded away with a speed that showed he recognized the danger from which he was escaping.

"And what's to be done with the other prisoner?" asked Partridge, remembering the man they had left a little behind them.

"Oh, sw'ar him in an' let him go—if yer find him thar. Hyar kim ther cowboys. I'll jest retire; but yer kin speak a good word fur me, all ther same. Tell ther Donner ez I'm ready ter give her them p'ints we war a-talkin' ov, whenever she's ready ter give me a hearin'; an' mebbe be you'd better say nothin' 'bout ther leetle picnic yer come acrost, up in ther mountins t'other night. So-long. When thar's suthin' wrong a brewin', you'll allers find Sodder Si around."

The vagabond sauntered off into the darkness, and disappeared just in time to escape the notice of the throng that came tearing toward the spot.

"Don't be too previous, there," shouted Kenyon, sharply, as he heard the clicking of hammers that seemed preparatory to a volley. "I reckon that we have the thing cleared up, about as neatly as the case will admit of, and there's no use to burn powder till you see where it will do some good. I think you will find a few corpses if you look around, and by this time the rest of them have got away. Keep an eye out, though. There's no telling how soon the reds may take a notion to pump in a little lead. Up nearer to the house I think you'll find some of them."

A yell followed, as his voice was recognized; and a rush was made in the direction indicated.

Another yell went up, as the corpse of the Apache, over whom Burton had leaped, was found, and under cover of the excitement the three went on in search of Alfredo, though, after the hint that Sodder Si had given, they were not surprised to find that in some way he had escaped from the cords that had bound him, and managed to get entirely away.

"Now then, if your fellows are satisfied with your frolic, and are ready to come down to hard common sense, maybe you'll tell what all this is about, anyhow. If you were getting up a special picnic for the benefit of Donna Mercedes you might have had the grace to have given me an invite."

"Don't be ashy, Buttons. This was Jimmy's entertainment; and I only dropped into it to help keep peace in the family. Let him expiate, for blame me if I know any more about it than you do."

"I can take your word for it; but I'll swear it has a most mysterious look. What was the fair Mercedes doing, patrolling around this time of night? She seemed to be the hub of the excitement, and you were just behind her."

"Now you're way off. No Mercedes have I seen."

Then Kenyon stopped suddenly. It would not do to be too definite.

"My hat is at your disposal, old man, and if there was any cake in question I would say, take it along. Stick to your story, of course; there's a lady in the case. Let brother Partridge expound. He has the floor, and maybe his tongue isn't tied by force of circumstances."

Kenyon was not in his most saintly mood, anyhow; but he received the aspersions on his veracity with a perfect silence that was better than an answer, leaving Partridge to strike in.

"Drop it, boys, this is no place for chinning. The crowd will be here in a moment, and I cannot manufacture a lie that will hold water unless I can get my fingers on Crazy Ike. He's liable to tell the whole truth at any time that he comes in. Better put Buttons to the front. He can be the hero of the occasion, with the exact truth in his favor; and we'll talk to correspond. Don't think either of us knows how he got here. I was prospecting with Crazy Ike, looking after his bonanza, and struck a fellow named Alfredo, who was laying out points along with the Apache, Four Claw. I followed them back to the ranch, because I knew they were going to try and strike Mercedes. On the way I met Charley and that old vagabond. Then there was a general riot in the dark, and that's all I know about it. Let Buttons talk if some one must. Now come on for the ranch. I'll lay even money that Ike Dobbs is at work over there, and that the whole gang will go sailing off in that direction."

He pointed toward the *motte* as he ceased speaking, and they heard the sounds of rapid firing. In that direction the most of the herdsmen were already darting. If there was a chance for a fight every one seemed to want that over first. Then there would be time enough for explanation. Still, they found a small group gathered around a ghastly little heap.

The Indian whom Burton had fired at first of all had evidently been only wounded, and had made his escape; but the other was just where he had straightened out after the bullet had hit him. As Kenyon and his friends reached the place the padre, Rocodo, came waddling out from the ranch, bearing in his hand a lantern. As he held the light toward the grim face that was now set in death he uttered an exclamation of alarm; then his lips closed with a sudden resoluteness, that Kenyon saw as he stepped forward.

"Worthy father, the Philistines are cut and

around. There should be some one here who knows the lay of the land and the nature of the beasts. Where is Don Ramon?"

"Verily thou art right. It will take a general to manage our defense if this be the part of an open warfare, though I cannot yet believe. It may be well to send a *vaquero* to the ranch of Estvan, to inform him that the heathens are out. He left for his own place at sundown, with the thought to return in the morning early. If he be not warned he may foolishly thrust himself into danger."

"To say nothing of the fact that we are in some danger ourselves. This may end the affair; but I've a strong suspicion that the presence of the red-skins has more meaning than shows on the face of it. As we are comparative strangers here I think we can be of the most assistance in and about the house; when daylight comes we'll be ready for a scamper with the best of you."

"My son, thy wisdom is of the best. There are enough and to spare of those who can do the business better than thou. Go thy way as seemest best. The Ranch of the Seven Saints will hardly look for protection to the stranger that is within her gates."

"But its mistress may," interrupted the voice of Mercedes. "What is the meaning of all this uproar? Come with me, Sir Strangers, and give an account of what has happened."

While the lady spoke Kenyon had a chance to look over her shoulder, and saw beyond the laughing face of Luilla, with her finger pressed lightly on her lip. He nodded, almost imperceptibly; and Burton, whose keen eyes were watching everything, saw, and was perplexed.

CHAPTER XII.

BUSINESS CARDS.

KENYON was fairly puzzled, in spite of himself. It would not do to reveal the particulars of his midnight meeting, especially after the half-confidence of the young lady. As had been already suggested, the best plan seemed to be to allow Burton, who knew the least of all, to tell the story. After the hint of the Donna, he would hardly be so simple as to introduce any personalities.

Kenyon looked inquiringly at him, when they were once more within the ranch, and so did Partridge. On the strength of that, so did Mercedes, also.

Probably for the first time she obtained a fair idea of what a good-looking young man he really was.

"Nobody seems to know much about it," he observed. "We couldn't sleep, and as that always means something, we kept our eyes open. It don't take much to make a man suspicious when he is on a strange stamping-ground. Then I held the fortifications while Partridge and Charley made a flank movement. As that separated the forces, I was fool enough to shoot when I saw an opening. Of course that meant a corpse or two; but, really, it seemed a pity, and if it was all to do over again, we might save a heap of alarm and leave things in better shape for the future. It's not always wisest to drop a red-skin just because he wears a top-knot."

"Don't apologize so humbly. We all take our chances here, and if one drops the wrong man by mistake, the lookout is his own in the near hereafter. I don't think you have gone far wrong in this case, though why Four Claw's braves should have been prowling around here with hostile intent I cannot conceive. If there is to be war between us, it is as well that the first blows are in our favor. I shall be anxious, though, until I know whether there has been any damage done elsewhere. I think the danger is over for the night, and we will know more in the morning when Diego has had opportunity to examine the trail. Now that he is on his guard, the Apaches will have to keep their distance, for I doubt if they are in force sufficient to make an open attack."

There seemed to be small regard for life at the Ranch of the Seven Saints, and very little fear.

Diego and his men did indeed patrol the surrounding country—without finding any traces of the enemy—but the regular inmates of the house, and the guests as well, retired, and soon, oblivious of danger, every one seemed to be wrapped in slumber.

It is scarcely necessary to say that the next morning the three visitors did not oversleep themselves.

They were awake at daybreak, and going over the ground near the ranch by sunrise. There were some things to be done and other things to be said, and the sooner they were attended to the better. They went out openly, and yet thought they had not attracted attention.

Probably they never were worse fooled. As they strolled along in the direction of the tree under which Kenyon had met with his adventures of the previous night, two pair of bright eyes were furtively watching them.

"By all the saints, they are the coolest young villains I ever saw," laughed Mercedes, "and it

would be a great pity if they came to any harm. I wish I knew rightly who and what they are, and exactly what is their object here."

"Ah, yes," murmured Luilla. "If there was but one of them one could guess. But three of them—they cannot *all* of them hope to marry the charming widow."

"Ha, ha! There is no end to the impudence of these Americanos. Truly, one can imagine the most absurd things and then find the mark away beyond. Are they as brave as they seem? If they are not they are in danger, as they were warned. If they are, then they may bring danger to us. I wish that I knew."

"Perhaps it will not be so hard to find out. They cannot return for some time, even if they wished to. We might examine their baggage. Who knows what information is to be found there? And no one will ever know."

"Don't be so inquisitive. When it would lead one beyond what is honorable it is time to strangle the feeling. We cannot forget that they are my guests."

"That depends. You could do no less than ask them to stay; but a lone woman must be on her guard."

The bright eyes twinkled. Evidently the señorita was not in sympathy with the delicacy of feeling that would allow a chance to escape.

"Come. We can at least take a peep at their den. Trust me. A great deal can be learned just by noting how they lodge themselves in Liberty Castle."

"Nonsense," said the Donna; and then, like a true woman, she followed without another word.

"You see, they are dressed in their best," suggested Luilla. "They have not so much baggage that it would take any time to overhaul it, and I have an idea they may have left behind them something that may show more fully who they are. There will be no harm in looking, anyhow. And I confess I would not be sorry to be convinced that they were not as bad as you would make them out."

So the two glided into the room, feeling very much like a pair of thieves; since they were come to steal what secrets they could.

A glance around, and then Mercedes laughed again; this time as though she meant it. Perhaps it was chance; more likely it was a bit of quiet sarcasm. Everything was in perfect order; but the few effects of the three were laid out in such an open manner that a thorough inspection could only require a few moments.

"Of course I knew they would not be so careless as to leave a clew," said Mercedes, as she ran her eyes over the things, "though I ought to feel angry at the implied reproach. We can go away as wise as we came."

"Wait. Don't take two bites at a grape—or try to leave another for some one else, see. In our honor no doubt, they are dressed in their best. Yonder are the coats they wore when they came. Perhaps they think what is least hidden is best hidden—and don't reckon on a woman's wits to see that point; I shall examine their pockets."

Luilla promptly put her plan into execution; and as the most effective way she turned them inside out. Then she stood in perplexity.

"These are their business suits," she muttered, "yet, for as particular-looking young men as they seem, they are strangely out of repair. What could they safely carry in such pockets as those?"

"Derringers," responded Mercedes, looking over her shoulder, "derringers; and from the looks of the lining they have evidently used them to some purpose. We need not be alarmed for them. They can take care of themselves, as of course we knew, all along. I think it will be just as well not to try any pranks; and when they put these coats on we had better stand out of possible range; they say such men are wonderfully expert; but, for one, I prefer men who aim when they intend to shoot."

"And Don Ramon," said Luilla, a little under her breath. "Would it not be just as well to give him just a little warning? He is so headstrong, and it would seem as though we had a hand in murder if he should be suddenly taken off."

"Don Ramon must take care of himself," answered Mercedes, with a shrug of her pretty shoulders; "I only wish that we dared to make these men our real friends. Whatever else they may be they are persons of nerve, and the three are better than a little army. I am afraid Ramon and the good father will have some trouble with them yet, if they attempt the overbearing style they have put on with others."

"Betcher sweet life they will!"

The chorus, in a thick husky voice startled the two more than a discharge of musketry would have done. Where the speaker was hidden neither Mercedes nor her friend stopped to inquire; but with a pair of screams that were earnest if low, they ran out of the room.

"What was it?" asked Mercedes when they had regained her own bedchamber. Between fright and hates her words were almost a gasp.

"How can I tell? We were so frightened that we didn't take time to inquire. It is the first

time I ever knew you to do a cowardly thing in my life."

"And it was the first time I ever was caught doing a mean thing," hotly retorted Mercedes.

"Humbug, a woman must protect herself; and it strikes me that there is some danger afoot unless we know just who it was that spoke. Did you recognize the voice?"

"Indeed I did not—and yet, I faintly suspect—"

"Then I will see if I cannot find out. Wait for me here. No, there is no present danger. I am armed; and I will know."

She slipped away from the grasp of Mercedes, who would have hindered her, and ran back to the room they had left in such haste, and peeped in through the still open door.

The apartment was vacant; but on the table was a letter which certainly had not lain there before.

Trembling in spite of herself she stole into the room, and snatched up the missive.

On it was traced in a bold hand:

"DONNA SALVADOR."

"Ah," she thought. "For her. This will throw light on it."

With the letter in her hand she went back to Mercedes.

CHAPTER XIII.

A FIGURE AT THE MOTTE.

WHILE the ladies of the ranch were investigating the belongings of their visitors the three were busily engaged in going over the trail they had made the previous night, and explaining to each other their several adventures.

The retainers of Donna Mercedes were, and had been through the night, on the watch, but there were no signs that the interlopers had halted in their retreat to the fastnesses from whence they had come. The wounded men had escaped, and the dead brave had been left behind without any apparent concern upon the part of their comrades. Whether there would be any pursuit was a question that was to be settled, apparently, by Don Ramon, when he arrived. That was the answer invariably given to each careless question of the three.

"The Don holds the ace every time, no matter who deals," said Kenyon, more thoughtfully than usual. "I'm afraid that this firm has no show at all as long as he is in the game. If a fellow only knew whether she wanted him in or out one would know better whether it was best to go on with the deal, or jump the board. What's your opinion, Buttons?"

"I had an idea that you were running the game for all it was worth. When you throw up your cards it will be time enough for the rest of us to ask for a hand. As long as I'm only capping in I don't care a continental law you run it."

"Don't be sullen over it. Fact is, I begin to think maybe the thing is getting beyond me, and some one else had better take up the running."

"Why, confound you, you haven't fairly extended yourself yet. If I hadn't had a little experience myself of how it works I'd tell you a little plain truth. But there is no use to talk to a man that's in love—no more use than if he had the jinx-jams. Take my word for it. You started off with the inside track, but you lost it before you got to the first turn. Give it up and make play for Luilla. Your heart is in that, and you may win."

"Buttons for wisdom. You are more than half right. Somebody else come to the front; who is it to be? Will you take my mantle? What do you say, Partridge? He's about right, ain't he?"

"Right as usual, and I'm willing to trust my interests with Brother Burton. As for me, unless the duties of the hour strongly demand my presence, I've a private bank that I think is going to pan out a heap more profitable. Isaac is by no means as insane as he would let on, and if there is no objection I think I had better go in on the ground floor with him until you need me more in the other matter. It is always best to have two strings to your bow. Then, if we can't do any better we can get up a compromise with Mrs. Mercedes, and won't go back empty-handed."

"Run your bonanza, by all means, if you think there is anything in it; but meantime there are two things to be settled. Is Burton to be the man to pin our fortunes to; and what is to be done with the Don?"

"Strikes me that it might be as well to allow the Donna to decide on the first point, and fate show what answer to give on the second. Women are apt to want to choose for themselves, and though we are as apt to take care of ourselves as the next none of us are given to cold-blooded murder, even if the millions of Mercedes were hanging on it. Let Burton do his best, however, and if the Don attempts violent measures give him as good as he sends."

"Very fairly answered and at that we will let the matter rest. Only, as your man of the bonanza has not been heard of since last night, and you were so careless as to leave him where he stood a good chance of receiving his crown of glory, I am afraid your rosy expectations may

be dampened in double-quick order. When you had him it's a pity you didn't get all the points. I've been in too many such wild-goose chases not to know the probable chances when you hunt for a hidden mine."

"Correct you are. Only, for once the fates have been good to us. Unless my eyes are 'way off, yonder is my man, now."

He nodded slightly with his head, and the others, turning cautiously saw a man staggering slowly toward them, and at a distance of only a few hundred yards away.

"And yonder, if I mistake not, comes our friend the Don. We'll soon know whether we are to have a war of attack, or if the flurry of last night is to end 'till the red rascals come again."

"From what you overheard, I am inclined to think it will be the latter. Ramon will be prone to think there has been a mistake somewhere, and will throw the blame on us if he sees the chance."

"Unless we open his eyes. If he knew that Four Claw and Alfredo are pulling in the same boat he might be inclined to take a different view of the subject. Shall we open his eyes, or allow the two to fight it out as best they can?"

"Good. That settles it. I had forgotten Alfredo in my calculations. He may settle the Don, and then we can fight it out with him without half so much hesitation."

"That plan shows your piety. What you won't do yourself you'll allow some one else to do for you. I didn't think you were willing to see the pack set up for such a deal."

"Hang it, man, you're right. I wouldn't, and I won't. We'll give the Don a hint and all start fair. Then if he plays foul we'll see what sort of a show nerve and brains have against him."

The latter part of their conversation was carried on in a hurried whisper. Ike Dobbs had come very close, and it was no part of their plans to take him into their confidence. When he halted within a few yards of them Partridge hailed him cheerfully.

"Hello, old man, where you been? Here's three anxious mourners, anyway, that were getting ready for a funeral; over at the house you have no idea of the weeping and wailing that is going on. If it's a fair question, how did you get away?"

"Didn't git took, which are ther best way ez I knows on. The pison reds war all round ther bush, an' mebbe I hed ter salt a few afore I read my title cl'ar. What's been goin' on hyar while I've bin gone?"

As Ike had only been able to guess at what had happened around the ranch during the night, they gave him a brief outline of the facts, and he then told them his own adventures—carefully leaving out of all mention the name of Partridge, or the aim he had in view in visiting the little *motte*, from which Four Claw and the rest had advanced upon the ranch. He had simply thrown himself on the ground and crawled out of the road at as rapid a rate as he could. When the retreat of the Apaches took place he found himself fairly in the line of their route, and being more than anxious to avoid the chance of meeting them had run away at such a rate that it was impossible to get back that night and so had camped where he found himself when there seemed no longer any danger of meeting with the enemy. When morning came he strolled slowly and cautiously towards the ranch, and found to his delight that it was still standing.

Having told his story he winked at Partridge in an owl-like way and then hurried on.

"There's a pard for you," laughed Partridge. "Wise as a serpent and as harmless as a dove. Better go on now and see what the Don has in pickle for us. If he puts on airs I shall certainly have to smile."

"At what?" asked Burton.

"To see him drop, of course."

The Don never looked better than when in the saddle, and as he came swooping up the three could not help but admit to themselves that he was a rival to be feared. He had a wicked courage, a practiced skill, and besides, was on such terms of intimacy with every one in and about the house that he seemed a part of the establishment. It would be no light task to oust him, and if he went alive somebody would be more than surprised.

He had already heard from a messenger sent to apprise him, of the occurrences of the previous night, and had made up his mind as he came along. When the three strolled up he greeted them with an unexpected cordiality of manner, and showed at once what seemed to be on his mind.

"No, senors, I do not think you were wrong. I doubt if the sons of the plain meant present harm, but they might have come again, when their knowledge would have been of good. They have had their lesson, and for a time there will be nothing to fear. When their chief learns that they were found prowling near the ranch, with no good will, he will take heed that such a thing happens not again. Between Four Claw, the highest and the most powerful of the Apaches, and the Ranch of the Seven Saints, the peace has always been unbroken."

"Something of that kind I had fancied my-

self, and no one would have regretted more than I to disturb the amity that existed. But there was little time to think, and I believe we did the best, after all. I've seen the red rascals prowl around before now, and I know what happened."

"Si, señor. Yes. I know. Say no more. I hope the Donna was not alarmed. To her I would pay my regards. If you are on your way back we may walk together."

So the three found themselves walking along quite amicably with the Don, who had confided his mustang to the keeping of one of his attendants.

Just as they were entering the ranch Kenyon gave a glance toward the little *motte*, and was in time to see a human form disappearing under its shadow. He was not certain, but it seemed to him that he recognized the figure. He said nothing to the rest, but followed them thoughtfully into the house.

CHAPTER XIV.

CHECK TO THE PADRE.

WHILE Kenyon was taking his backward glance, and seeing something that was worth the viewing, Partridge, the philosopher, was studying the Don.

Of course he was not obtrusive, but his keen eyes were watching for something to show what was the meaning of this sudden cordiality.

"He's a deal too silken to suit my time," thought the young man. "I'd sooner see him hectoring around like he did after Charley slew the bear. He's got some fine scheme in his head. Of course we can head him off in the long run; but, meantime, some one may get a knife-thrust by mistake. No doubt he intends to work up Four Claw to take his revenge out of the Gringos, and if he tries that game on, we will have to look a little out."

As usual Partridge was not far wrong, though the Don would have been wonderfully surprised if he had been told that his purpose was suspected. He believed that his counsel was hidden deep in his own breast.

As all this occurred before breakfast, it will not be hard to believe that the appetite of everyone had become pretty well sharpened. Mercedes met her visitors cordially, but she allowed them small time for conversation until she hurried them away.

"Something has happened," thought Partridge, as he dissected her manner, and marked her glittering eyes and slightly hightened color. "If she is excited over the affair of last night, she takes a queer way of showing it, and she's not the woman I made her out to be. If Burton is to take up the cards Charley has thrown down, he wants to be very careful while she is in such humor, and, I vow, the Don himself had best be cautious. The way she looks around it wouldn't take much to have her send the whole crew of us packing. I wonder if she could have had a glimpse of Crazy Ike's bonanza. Faith I don't know whether the thing is a jest and a by-word, or a serious truth. I'll find out before I am twenty-four hours older."

In the presence of the mistress of the ranch the Don became somewhat more stately. He regretted his absence the night before; and cautioned Mercedes to be on her guard until she was certain that the Indians who had been prowling around were only independent marauders, and not the scouts of a large force that might be in hiding.

"So far, senora, we have been most fortunate. The peace has been unbroken for nearly a dozen years. Yet the wealth of the Seven Saints is a temptation, and I would not trust the savages too far. If we have not seen them, they have been about. They may even be watching your hacienda now, waiting for a chance to swoop. If they do strike it will be quick and hard. What say you, senors? Is not my advice good? Would it not be best for the Donna to confine herself within these walls until we positively know the full truth?"

"You know the truth now like a book," heartily rejoined Kenyon. "With a bodyguard such as we can make up, of course she is safe enough; but without it—ah, Donna Mercedes, promise us that you will not venture abroad."

The hearty acquiescence of the young man surprised the lady, who was in no mood to promise.

"I hate pie-crust, which is made to be broken. Also, promises. Whatever I might say, when the time came I would scamper away as though there were no such things in the world. So, I beg of you, gentlemen, to excuse me. No promises do I make—though, as I rather pride myself on my good common sense, I think you may trust me to take the very best care of my hair. I don't think it was ever grown to be caressed by Apache fingers."

Burton looked up somewhat surprised. He had not been listening very closely to what had been said, but the last words struck him very forcibly.

"She does not promise," he thought. "What in the name of creation she may be up to I cannot imagine; but one thing is certain—she will not prom'se. That means there is something on the carpet, and that William Burton, Esquire,

must be around. And I'll bet he gets more glory than profit in the end. He always does."

As Mr. Burton had passed through life with more than the average of purple and fine linen, and had always lived on the fat of the land, the idea of his murmuring at the dealings of fate was to a degree ungrateful, and for the rest ridiculous; but that is the way of the world, and in spite of his plaint Billy Burton had had a good deal more than he deserved, both of glory and profit.

After they had finished the meal and sauntered around some little, the Don taking upon himself the giving of orders after holding the briefest of consultations with Mercedes, there was a scatterment and a disappearance that began to look very much like premeditation on the part of everybody concerned.

To make up for it the padre, Rocodo, who had not been visible, turned up, more unctuous and inscrutable than ever. Where he had been he did not deign to explain to Burton, whom he found lounging on the piazza. When told that Mercedes, for whom he asked, was in conference with Don Ramon and the chief of her herders, he passed on into the house without another word.

Burton smiled as he went.

"If you find her there now I'll swear that my wits are wool-gathering. Diego has gone about his business, and if I am not mistaken the Donna is getting ready for an excursion of some kind as soon as she can drop the gentle Ramon. If she wasn't trying to plaster him on Charley I don't know the signs of the times. No, blessed father, it's each man for himself; and it would be a sin and shame if we didn't throw you off the track when we have the chance."

Mr. Burton, lounging on the piazza, had in fact an object in view and he did not propose to have it interfered with, if the judicious stretching of the truth would be all that his success would require. He suspected that the Donna was preparing for an excursion of some kind, and he did not intend that she should go alone.

Somewhat to the surprise of the padre he found Don Ramon cordially engaged with Charley Kenyon in an attempt to bankrupt each other by trying their fortunes to the utmost over table and cards. They had evidently been at work for some time, and so far without any prominent success on either side. Mercedes was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is our lady?" asked the padre, abruptly.

"Faith, if you depend on us to tell, she is a lost lady. She was here a moment ago, and I suppose will be back again to finish her story. Meanwhile the Don is doing his best to make the game interesting; and he's not doing so badly. Sit down and help along the good cause."

For once the padre did not seem to think it worth while to return an answer. Without even a glance at how the game stood, or even at what it was, he flung out of the room.

No one knew better than he all the ins and outs of the ranch, and he hastily rummaged the house, his face growing darker with each failure.

When he had satisfied himself that the Donna was not to be found, he bethought himself of the visitor he had so cavalierly left out on the piazza.

"Maledito! He was not there for nothing," he muttered. "While his friend amused the simple fool over the cards, he kept watch on the outside. Was it for himself, or for the third? And where is the third man? I must know, if I have to tear it out of the lips of the simpering fool at the table or the solemn fool on the piazza. Oh, beyond a doubt, the two are here on the watch, while the third is off with Mercedes, pouring the sickening trash into her ears. Only a woman could listen to it, and she is a woman no wiser than the rest. Come, I will see this Burton. In a moment I can turn him inside out."

The padre's soliloquy brought him out upon the piazza again, but shrewd as had been his guesses, he had not altogether hit the mark. Mr. Burton had been lounging around in his own interests exclusively, and Father Rocodo had the satisfaction of finding that he had vacated his seat and taken himself off. The portico was entirely deserted.

A few yards away the boy whom Kenyon had dubbed Jehosaphat was standing in the sunshine, staring vacantly around him.

Sharply did Rocodo call to him to answer whither the American had taken himself, and for reply, Jehosaphat pointed out over the plain.

A solitary horseman, half a mile away, was riding as though his life depended on it, and Rocodo had no reason to doubt that it was Burton.

He gave one glance and then wheeled.

"To overtake him would pound me into a jelly. I am not so young as I once was, and the cushion suits me better than the saddle. But Ramon must do the work, and see where he goes to. If he could arrange so that he never came back, it would be all the better. We would have one less to fight, and I fear them. They will stop at nothing, and I know their true object. They will be more than dangerous."

Ramon will be a ravening wolf when I break in upon his game—he is the true gambler, and would die but he would play—but he must go."

He was gliding along with a noiseless step, but just outside of the door he halted suddenly, to listen. He heard the voice of Ramon raised in excitement, answered by Kenyon's laughing tones.

"My dear sir, you may swear in Dutch if you choose, and all the other languages, living or dead; but that will not add to your skill at monte a jot. I have worked the game at all times and places for all it was worth, and the idea of an amateur like yourself trying to skin me at it is simply ridiculous. You have one card up your sleeve, but I have spirited two away, and I defy you or any one else to find them. You see that made a complete new deal, and of course I knew *my* pair as far as I could see them. There they lie, face up; there is your card on the floor; and the money is in my pocket. If you've begun to squeal, it's time for me to quit. I was only amusing myself a little anyhow."

While speaking, Kenyon coolly leaned forward, and by a sudden, dexterous twitch, caused the card to flutter from the Don's sleeves to the floor.

"*Carajo!*" exclaimed Ramon, and with a skillful swing he unsheathed his saber and thrust full and fair at Charley Kenyon's breast.

CHAPTER XV.

A WILD STAMPEDE.

BURTON had made no mistake when he said to himself that the Donna had something in view that made her refuse to promise to remain within doors for the rest of the day—at least until Diego should return and report whether any danger was to be feared from outlying savages. At daybreak she would have given a cheerful yes, but since then she had read the letter that had so mysteriously reached her, and she was full of anxiety to be off, even in the teeth of danger.

She kept this fairly well hidden, however. Even Luilla was not aware of her exact intentions, and Burton was the only other one that suspected.

One thing that favored her was the fact that the herds were all to the south of the ranch.

The excursion to the north, in search of the missing cattle, was brought about by the fact that Diego had counseled gathering everything in to head them toward the lower pastures; and now the only retainers she would be liable to meet would be the scouts that had been sent out. These, she hoped, would be far beyond the point that she wished to reach.

Nevertheless, reckless as she was, she did not altogether disguise the danger. Over her shoulder was slung a light repeating rifle, at her waist was a revolver and stiletto, while the mustang that Jehosophat had quietly made ready for her was her own tried favorite.

She bounded lightly from the knee of the youngster to the saddle, gave a careless laugh at the question in his eyes, and was off like a thunderbolt, escaping without being observed by any one save the boy, and Luilla, who had asked no questions, but quietly climbed to the roof of the ranch.

Straight toward the little timber island she urged her steed.

So much time had she lost that she feared to waste more in trying to lay out a blind trail, which might deceive any curious ones. She pinned her hopes rather on having slipped away unperceived. With a start of fifteen minutes or so she did not care how soon some anxious friend should follow in her wake. In that time she hoped to be able to accomplish her aim, and be ready for return. She scarcely suspected that Jehosophat would betray her.

Hardly had she gone when that youth came sidling around the corner of the building just as the padre approached from the other side.

At sight of him the lad dodged back, yet watched until the father had entered the house. Then he approached the spot with boldness.

"Well, young man," said Burton, calmly surveying his features, and seeming to read them like an open book.

"If thou hast any desire to earn that coin your soul is yearning for, have my steed here inside of the second turn in a flash. I opine that the Donna has set forth, and that it is your opinion that I had best follow her."

"Si, señor," responded Jehosophat, not more than half-understanding the words, yet wonderfully surprised at what seemed to be a reading of his most secret thoughts.

"Then go, quickly," retorted Burton. "What in the name of sanctified blazes do you mean keeping me waiting here? My horse! Be off with you, if you want this."

He held up in his fingers a large silver coin as he spoke, and the eyes of the youth gave an avaricious twinkle. In truth, Burton had not in any respect mistaken the lad. The rapidity with which he darted away, and the small time that elapsed before his return with the mustang, showed that he was as apt as he was willing.

"That's only a starter, young man; and if you tie to us, and we stay long enough, you can buy a ranch and set up for a Don. But we've an un-

pleasant habit of cutting out tongues that tattle, and I would advise you to keep yours behind your teeth and the door shut. *Sabe?*"

Jehosophat nodded gravely, and Burton shook his rein. By the time that Rocodo came out again he was gone beyond recall.

As far as appearances went, Burton was simply away for a gallop. There was no particular object in sight, for which he was aiming, and as he curveted over the plain it would have taken a wise head to decide that he had the little *motte* in his mind.

Scarcely had Father Rocodo gone back, however, when he changed his course with suddenness, and held his mustang's head straight with a vengeance. He saw something that the padre missed altogether—a long dark line, advancing from the southwest.

At the first glimpse he whirled, and then stood up in his stirrups, looking anxiously over his shoulder.

"If that ain't the big herd on the stampede William Burton's judgment isn't worth shucks. Now, then, what's behind it? Are there half a dozen reds, or the whole Apache nation? It looks like war from the word go; and if they get away with all that loot there will be a pretty big hole in our fortune. What are they doing at the house? Why don't they keep their eyes open? The red raiders will ride in at the open doors; and I have no time to go back and warn them. I must look after the Donna. If she could be got safely out of the way I'd try my chances at the herd. They can't be all asleep at the ranch."

Of course they were not, although there were fewer there than usual, so many being away with Diego on the trail, or assisting to move the herds.

As he turned his gaze from the herd to the house he saw a puff of smoke go up from the roof. That was followed by a flash, and then the roar of a small cannon. Luilla from her post of observation had caught sight of the throng in the distance; and though not understanding what she saw she promptly gave the danger signal, which would be heard for miles around.

"Good," muttered Burton between his teeth, and urging his mustang on to a madder gallop. "That will waken them up. Once Mercedes out of the way and the Three Sports will give an account of themselves. Charley has his eyes open now, and I'll bet coin that Jim has dropped the bonanza like a hot potato. We're here for work, and we'll show them how the thing ought to be done."

The cattle were still a good distance off, though momentarily growing more distinct. If nothing caused them to change their direction their right flank would just about graze the further edge of the *motte*, and the herd would thoroughly sweep the ground beyond it.

If Mercedes had warning there was no apparent reason why she should not escape, unless she had gone on too far to retrace her steps before the line of animals cut her off. In that case, though she might be able to outrun the mad throng, yet she would be fair game for the stampedes that Burton believed were behind.

Yet this left out of account the possibility that the *vaqueros* of the Donna might be in close pursuit and ready to lend a helping hand. If not, what had become of them? Only a general slaughter could turn them from the trail of the main herd. And it might very well be that the Donna was hidden by the shadow of the timber island. If she was looking for a rendezvous what place more suitable?

With the leading rank of the cattle not half a mile away, Burton swooped around the outskirts of the *motte* at racing speed, and a thousand yards beyond, on foot on the open prairie, and alone, stood Mercedes.

CHAPTER XVI.

A WOMAN TO STAY.

MERCEDES, from the moment she had read the brief note, had been nervously anxious to be off, yet she did not allow her desires to outrun her prudence. Only one man had noticed that she was in a state of excitement that was not altogether accounted for by the known events that had transpired.

Even when in the saddle, and almost safe from any hindrance, she acted with a steady coolness that might disguise her purpose even if it caused her to lose time. She did not care if all the world knew of her errand, but she was afraid that if the little section of it that was harbored within the walls of the Seven Saints should suspect it, her aim might in some way be defeated.

And in that she was not far wrong.

The clump of timber into which she rode was of no great extent, and by daylight would hardly conceal a man from anything like close scrutiny. She rode slowly through it, looking carefully around, and was satisfied that she was alone.

At the further edge she halted, and drew from her breast the note.

"It is not the wording," she muttered. "That is a mere nothing; but it is the handwriting. Whose hand penned the lines? And with what

object? Could it be but a silly jest; or is there black treachery behind it? Anyhow, I am here; and woe to the fool who may attempt—"

The thread of her soliloquy was suddenly broken; and shading her eyes she looked long and earnestly over the plain.

Half a mile away there was a small, dark spot which she did not remember to have ever noticed there before.

At any other time she might have passed it over as not worth the investigation; not so now. Unless the letter was a hoax some one ought to be within sight of the spot, and this was the only chance. Of course it might be a wolf, or a stray calf, or anything else ridiculous. Then, again, it might be a painted Apache, prowling near the ranch in spite of the danger, to see what the affair of the previous night might call forth.

No sign of life did the dark spot show, yet the longer Mercedes looked at it the more certain was she that she could make out the figure of a man.

"If it is a man, then he is a wounded or a dead one. No chance is there there for an ambuscade, and on foot no one would think of capturing me if I came on horseback. I'll investigate. It may be that it is my correspondent; or it may be a relic of last night's affair."

In any case she had an interest, and once having made up her mind she did not delay, but sent her mustang toward the object, at as fast a rate as he could well carry her.

The dark spot obstinately refused to resolve itself until she was within pistol-shot distance of it. Then she made out that it was a man, wrapped well up in a blanket.

Though the hoofs of her mustang made noise enough to herald her approach, yet the form gave no sign of consciousness. Only for the fact that her nerves were free from that involuntary shrinking that one feels upon coming into the presence of a corpse she would have been certain that the man was dead.

At a free gallop, with a revolver clasped in one hand, ready for instant use, she approached; swept by, and then halted within a dozen yards, swinging herself out in careless fashion from the saddle. In the man upon the ground she recognized the tough old tramp, Sodder Si.

"The mystery deepens," she thought. "He was to have seen me yesterday, and I was troubling myself lest some foul play had happened to him. Now I find him here, where I least expected him. Can it be possible that he is the sender of that note; or is he an enemy; and has he been disposed of by my correspondent, whom I have reason to believe is certainly my friend? I will know when I have examined him—but I must beware of any treachery."

She stood looking at him from a little distance, and noted that his face was pale enough under the dirt, and that he quivered slightly, like one who might just be recovering his senses after some narrow approach to death. The weakness could hardly be counterfeited; and after a moment's close inspection she moved up to his side and placed her hand, with some repugnance, upon his forehead, just as the man gave a low, long-drawn sigh.

"My ragged friend," she said, "you had better have kept faith with me yesterday; perhaps it would have gone less hard with you to-day. What is the matter?"

The vagabond put his hand up feebly to the top of his head and stared into the face of the inquisitor. He had no answer ready for her, and if he could have collected his wits sufficiently to frame one he would not have had strength sufficient to have uttered it. For a moment or two more the two simply looked at each other.

The time lost was more precious than either of them could have dreamed. From the southwest the stampede was bearing, unnoticed, down.

"Gimme a leetle time," he spluttered, "an' I'll be all right. Bin a foolin' round a thundercloud, an' got hit with lightnin'. Next time I'll tend ter my biz, an' let ther other fellers 'tend ter theirs."

"But what has happened to you? Who has harmed you? Speak. I am still mistress here, and if there has been a wrong done, even to you, it shall be avenged."

"Don't fret yer purty head 'bout Sodder Si. He kin look arter his own 'fairs, 'thout outside help. An' ther feller that dropped me inter this didn't go fur ary harm, but on'y bit a leetle deeper than he 'tended to. He hes a claim on Sodder Si that the bloomin' serup ain't a goin' ter throw off fur a little crease like that. He told me ter go back, an' I sez 'me too,' an' then he sez it ag'in, in a diff'rent way an' I dropped. That's all."

"Still I don't understand. Who was it and what did he do?"

"One ov them Three Handsome Sports. Eo done me a good turn t'other night, when I war in a heap ov danger; an' I wanted ter gi'n him a leetle advice now, which he pulled an' plugged. ez yer kin see ef you'll notice me head, jest under ther ha'r. I didn't think no man could take ther drop on Sodder Si like that, but he's a sanctified snoozer at ther irons, an' don't yer remember."

"And what were yer doing here, anyway?"

"Waitin' fur you, ov course. I sh'd jedgo

yer got me billey-doo, er yer wouldn't be hyar, either."

"Then it was from you—that mysterious note? If so, what have you to say to me? I dare give you but a few minutes, and time is precious."

"Kinder looks ez tho' yer weren't so much boss arter all. Sorry, but my head ain't cl'ar ernuf ter talk biz jest now. Hey ter gi'n yer a leetle warnin' an' see yer later."

"A warning of what, and by what right do you approach me?"

"Old man, I begin to believe you are not what you seem."

She leaned toward Si, peering anxiously into his face.

"Ef I'm any wuss than I look, ther laws holp us both. But I'm on'y ole Sodder Si, an' don't you fool yerself on him. I wantter make a speck outen ther blessed ranch, an' ef I don't do it it won't be acause I don't see how ther land lays. I gi'n yer what I thort war a p'int afore, an' when yer ready ter take me in on thet send me word. An' ez a pard I rekermend yer ter bounce that Don Ramon, git rid ov Padre Rocco, an' fight mighty shy ov them Three Handsome Sports."

As he spoke Sodder Si tried to rise, and the dizziness that at once ensued showed that he was even weaker than he thought.

He fell backward with an exclamation of disgust, and for a moment both were silent.

Then it was that, for the first time, they noticed the rumbling of the advancing herd.

The Donna looked up with a start.

"What is that?" she cried.

"Don't be alarmed, purty," answered Si, coolly. "Ef my ole years don't deceive me it's ther big herd on ther stampede; an' it's more ner likely ther's a million 'Pash ahind it. Thar ain't no danger, in course; but you want ter git outen this, spry ez you kin move. Mount an' git, an' ther ole man'll crawl fur a hole."

"Too late!" cried Mercedes, pointing out over the plain. "In half a dozen years, Selim has not failed me, but yonder he goes now. For weal or woe our fortunes must be linked together until we escape this danger, or know the worst. I cannot desert you, and I cannot aid you; let us hope that the danger will go by."

The tramp slowly struggled to his knees, and brushing his hand across his eyes, took a long and earnest look toward the advancing stampede that was now frightfully near considering their dangerously exposed position.

"It ain't ther herd, but it's what may be ahind it. Ef they on'y give Sodder Si ten minnits' grace he'll be all hisself. Consarn that foolcrittur, what did he want ter bite so deep fur Ah!"

He fell back once more, and lay with his hands pressed tightly to his brows.

Mercedes was between him and the *motte*. Suddenly she gave a cry of delight, and gathering up her skirt so that it would not impede her progress, she bounded away. She had just seen Burton, riding as though his life depended on it, straight for her side.

CHAPTER XVII.

BURTON'S BEST.

BURTON was nearer than the herd—a little—and coming on faster; yet the chances were so balanced that one could not wonder that Mercedes ran to meet him. Little time was there to spare if she did not want to go down before those charging hoofs.

Yet her nerve did not give way. As she ran she watched the young fellow, and was cool enough to admire the skillful courage that was bringing him to her. He looked at her, and then, standing in his stirrups, glanced away over the herd, and again at the *motte* he had lately left.

It was just possible that he would have time enough to reach her, and get back to cover before the herd swept by.

Then he settled himself back firmly in the saddle, to prepare for the work that he had on hand.

"Minutes are worth millions!" he cried. "Put your hand on my shoulder and spring."

He gripped the saddle firmly with his knees, guiding his mustang closer than many a rider would have cared to come, at the same time bending out and reaching for her. His arm swept around her waist, and with a careless, dexterous swing, he raised her from the ground and seated her safely in front of him. Then, without checking his horse's stride, he was wheeling back toward the *motte*.

Mercedes uttered a cry and caught at the rein.

"No, no!" she exclaimed. "I cannot leave him. Save him, too!"

"You before all," was Burton's answer, given a little more sternly, but otherwise without a trace of agitation, and without a perceptible effort he held the mustang to its course.

At that Mercedes wasted no time in argument. Sinuous as a snake she writhed out of his grasp, and lightly dropped to the ground.

"Go!" she said. "I never deserted a friend yet; I will not begin now. Save yourself; I can die right here."

She flung these words at him with more of scorn than anger in her tone and then ran back

to where Sodder Si was crouching, and taking her stand in front of him, caught up the rifle she had dropped.

Actually it was the first sight that Burton had of the tramp, and he gave a little start of disgusted surprise as he saw him flourish a navy six, and heard that thickened voice mutter once more, "Me, too."

"Evidently that fellow lives around here," was Burton's mental comment as, without a particle of hesitation, he turned in his gallop, and rode recklessly for the herd, aiming for a brace of long-horns that at that moment were fifty yards in advance of the almost solid line.

"There's a chance, then," he thought, as he marked a narrow, straggling defile through the midst of the moving bodies beyond. "If I can break the front they may split and go by. If I fail we'll all go up the flume together."

First he fired two shots at the two of the frantic leaders; then he emptied his revolvers as fast as his finger could work the trigger, meantime driving with headlong recklessness into the defile, which widened as he went.

The pistols went back into his holsters, but the reports still went on. He was flourishing a whip that cut to the bone, with a wicked crash, at every stroke. He had turned his mustang, and now was going with the herd.

It was all the work of a moment. The cattle pressed to this side and that, and the irregular lane grew wider. When he returned to where he had dropped the two light-limbed leaders he found Mercedes behind them as a fortification, with Sodder Si, whose head was now rapidly clearing, close beside her.

He halted here, hastily recharging his pistols, and saw the flying hoofs go by with a smile that was only grimmer than usual.

"Save a few charges for what is behind. If the cattle don't close in again and shut their eyes I think we have them; but the children of the plain that are coming in the rear will be a little harder to stall off."

"Pluck from ther cellar-drain to ther chimbley-pots," said Si, scarcely seeming to note what the other said. "An' a hoss like that are wu'th his weight in gold. 'Tain't ther fu'st time he's hed his nose at ther head ov a stampede. Let ther cattle come, now; I think we've got 'em. An' ez fur ther 'Pash—they can't hold a candle 'round these hyar ole hoss, now that his head's cl'ar an' his pard hyar. I've got me stren'th, an' I've got me grip."

"Oh, hold your hush," said Burton, sharply.

He could only catch a confused medley of words; but it was no time for talk, even if Si was holding up his end while he spoke. They were not altogether safe from the herd; and they had yet to learn what was following in its rear.

"Don't spout about what you're not going to do, but be ready to jump. The line will be by in a moment more, and then we must cut for the *motte*. If the gang is not too large we can stand them off until help comes from the ranch—or, perhaps, break clean through."

"That's all right—but Sodder Si must shout er he'll bu'st a flue. It's ther ole man's way, but he don't mean nothin'; an' when ther time comes fur work you'll find him all thar. Ther time's a-comin'; jest see that ye'r ready yerself."

The danger from the herd was indeed almost past, and Burton was preparing for the work that was to follow. His well-trained mustang, though it showed traces of excitement, had never attempted to escape from his control, but stood at his shoulder.

"You will mount," said Burton, paying no further attention to what the tramp was saying. "The moment that a road is open do not hesitate, but ride for the *motte*. If the way seems clear go on to the ranch. We will cover your retreat—though, if you once get ahead of the hounds, all you have to do is to give her her head and let her go. With your weight up I doubt if there is anything on four feet that can catch up with her. I needn't tell you to shoot first and palaver afterward, if any one tries to stop you. Ready now. Here you are."

The Donna was accustomed to giving orders herself; but time was too precious, and the good sense of this too apparent to waste a valuable minute in questioning. She laid her hand on the saddle, and stood at an attention; then, when Burton extended his palm she promptly placed her foot upon it, and floated into her seat.

"Now, off with you!" exclaimed Burton.

Yet she did not start, for the hand of Sodder Si darted to her bridle-rein.

"Hold hard! Thar's figgers in ther bresh, an' several lions in ther way. Looks ez though ther reds knowed beforehand what we'd be up to, an' tuk to ther timber ter scoop us all in ef we made that-a-ways. You kin jedge now, Mr. Burton, whether we can make ther ranch."

A half-smothered malediction rose to the lips of the young man, as he plainly saw the figures that skulked in the timber, and then for the first time saw the Apaches who had been thundering on behind the cattle.

There could be no doubt about it. The stampede had been a carefully prepared affair; and the reds were in such force that they did not

care whether they met a party from the Seven Saints, or not.

"Ahem," said Burton, coldly, when he had regained his self-possession. "There are fifty of the red rascals if there is one, and they mean business. If we were all mounted, now, I might see a way out; but as it is, I think we are in for an election. We can't fight them all. Probably I had better shoot the Donna first to save her, and then set up all the damage I can on them. I think I can speak for, say six, before I go under."

"Thank you for your care for me, but what good would my millions do me if I was dead? We have quite a neat little fortress, and the best plan would be for us to stay here and fight it out."

"That's all right for us," responded Burton with a shrug of his shoulders. "But what's to become of my mustang? They're bound to drop her anyhow; and I'll never be able to afford another one that suits me as well."

"Quite complimentary. I am not of as much value as a horse, I suppose."

"I didn't mean it exactly that way," answered Burton, quite taken aback by such a plain statement of the truth. "You two are each beyond duplication, and so I think you ought to be willing to get out of this in company. Indeed you are only a clog here. If you won't go this way, go that. When you have made a safe offing you can look over your shoulder, and I'll vouch for it that you see us all right, and more corpses than you can shake a stick at."

"It's too late for that dodge either," answered the Donna, looking coolly around. "See, we are almost totally surrounded and as we cannot ride into the herd I see nothing to do but to fight it out. Be ready. Here is our friend Mr. Four Claw, unless my eyes greatly deceive me. Perhaps after all, you had better save that one barrel for me. I don't see that life would be worth the living if I had to fall into their hands."

A force of at least a score of mounted Apaches were riding straight for the spot.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A BIT OF SWORD-PLAY.

DON RAMON was an expert swordsman, and when he thrust at the unarmed man he had not a doubt but that he would see him go down. He had considerable reason to hate and some reason to fear Charley Kenyon, and in the very heat of his passion he was conscious of a wicked pleasure at having both chance and opportunity to remove him from the way.

One little mistake did he make in his calculation. With a wave of his hand and a quick turn of the wrist Kenyon escaped the danger, parrying the thrust with the barrel of the pistol that had appeared as if by magic in his grasp. Then he sprung back, cocking the weapon as he leaped, and led the Don at his mercy.

"I wouldn't, old man. The fact is, you haven't the ghost of an idea how childish you really are. Why, any of us would take you across his knee and give you a taste of the brush if it wasn't for respect for the place. You're putting on entirely too many frills, and I'm not sure you won't go home on a shutter yet, if you don't sing a leetle smaller. Drop it, man, drop it. Don't you see you have no chance?"

The Don fairly foamed. The sight of the revolver checked him for a moment, but as Kenyon ceased speaking, with his head down, he made a rush.

"Kill me if you can," he gritted. "One of us must die, and here."

"Not at all necessary, my little man. I might throw you out of the window, and jump on you, but I guess I won't. I'll show you something else. You want a lesson, and I'll give it to you, all the way and back again."

On the wall hung a pair of crossed sabers. With a sudden side spring, Kenyon avoided the rush, and snatching a weapon from the wall, threw himself on guard.

Again the Don came forward, but this time with a slower, and yet a more confident advance. When the pistol disappeared, and the steel took its place, he had an idea that he had nothing more to fear, since he was a finished swordsman, and it was not likely that the American would have more than a passing acquaintance with the weapon.

In less than half a minute by the clock the Don was thoroughly undeceived. The wrist that opposed his was as strong as steel itself, and as supple and cunning as he had ever felt.

There was little room for either to move about, and right there Kenyon had the advantage. The Don was used to playing a shifty game, and the sense of being confined made him less at home in his deliveries. There was little chance here to avoid a close conflict, and hardly had they begun when Kenyon by a dexterous parry and a lightning thrust, drew first blood.

At the touch of the steel the Don drew back a pace; and in spite of wound and excitement gave a quick glance beyond the line of Kenyon's shoulder. It was only a brief wandering of the eyes, but Kenyon marked it, and knew that they were no longer alone, even without the trium-

phant gleam that darted from his antagonist's eyes as they once more met his.

Again Ramon advanced, with a seeming savagery, to renew the conflict.

"I have thee, villain!" he hissed. "Defend thyself."

"If the court knows herself she will," retorted Kenyon, the laugh on his lips as cheery as ever. "There, and there, and there."

He had made a quick passage, and then thrust thrice—Ramon parrying every point yet giving back step by step. If he was to be aided from behind why should he run a useless risk?

"And there!" A fourth time Kenyon thrust; but this time was different from all the others. He really meant it. Under Estvan's point went his blade, all his weight and strength following it, and with a great crash he fairly pinned the Mexican to the wall.

Then his fingers loosened from the saber's hilt, he whirled upon his heel, and stood facing Rocodo, the laughing glitter still in his eye, and the ready revolver in his hand.

"Easy, good father. For a man of your holy profession that knife you hold there is out of all proportion. Of course, when you find a couple of brawlers in the blessed Ranch of the Seven Saints it is but right that you should interfere; but I wouldn't do it in just that way."

For once in his life Padre Rocodo was fairly taken aback. The side movement of Kenyon had caused him to hesitate, thinking that another step might bring him back again while he hesitated to strike in until he was certain that Ramon would not prove a match for the young man, who seemed to be so excellently well posted on all points.

The hesitancy gave the game away; and Kenyon, with the Don pinned to the wall, and the padre covered, had a chance to work his will; Rocodo's uplifted hand dropped hastily to his side.

"My children, what is the meaning of this? Surely you forget where you are. This is no *posada*, for wine-drinking and brawls. Strangely wanting, are you, in respect for the beloved mistress when you act—*Santa Maria!* Hast thou killed him, villain?"

"Oh, he's not half as dead as he might have been—or as you will be if you try any tricks of the trade on this smiling infant. I only pinned him up in the breeze to cool; but if this don't suit I can turn him loose again, and go to work for keeps."

It was true enough; Ramon's wounds were slight enough, but he was fastened in place as though he was chained there. The blade had gone into his sleeve at the wrist and pinned his arm down against his side, the weapon having passed on and through coat and vest, grazing a rib pretty hard as it went. Still, he was not injured in body, whatever harm had been done to him in mind; and while the padre and Kenyon had been exchanging compliments he had been squirming silently, yet vigorously, in the hope of being able to tear himself loose.

The work was too neatly done for that, and his wrath began to bubble over.

"*Caramba!*" he howled, and just then came a dull roar from seemingly above their heads, followed by a quiver of the whole house. Luilla had just discharged the signal-gun.

At that the men looked at each other in silence. All understood the signal.

"The Apaches are out, and on the war-path," whispered Rocodo. "Yet who could have fired the gun? Hark! I hear some one."

He held up his hand while he listened, and they could all distinguish the patter of running feet. In an instant more Luilla burst into the room.

"Up with you, here!" she shouted. "Make no delay! The whole herd is stampeding, and if I mistake not the Apaches are behind, to drive them to their fastnesses."

"Let them drive," said Kenyon, turning away. He had a little modesty, and did not care to enter into explanations concerning the state of affairs.

"But Donna Mercedes is right in their path, and if they turn this way, as most likely they will, what is there to prevent their taking the ranch?"

"Mercedes! That is something else. I'm around, as usual. If my friends turn up, put them where they will do the most good; and that's just where you will find me."

There was no apparent haste, but before any one had time to say a word, he was gone, following closely after Luilla, who, in her excitement, saw nothing of the strange position of the Don, or the confused look of the padre. She gave the alarm and then rushed from the room.

Rocodo received the intelligence like one in a dream, and followed the two with a slow, staggering gait, totally ignoring the unfortunate Don, who had been seething against the wall in silence. As the padre departed his wrath broke out once more, and this time with a new object.

And just in the midst of a string of oaths that would have made the Donna turn pale, and even shocked Charley Kenyon, there was a light, stealthy step outside of the door, and a moment later a dark, villainous face was thrust inside of the room.

"Tomasso!" exclaimed the Don. "Thou hast come when most I needed thee. Release me, quick! I am unharmed, but, truly, I am afraid to move, for the blade is as sharp as a razor."

There was a grin on the face of Tomasso as he approached, in spite of the excitement under which he had been laboring but a moment before.

"Thou art trussed up, most noble Don, like a chicken for the market. Who has done this? The padre, as he hurried past, told me that thou hadst need of my service, but beyond that he said naught. Hast thou heard the voice of the great gun on the roof? If so, thou must know that there is danger even for those within the ranch, and death for those without. The red devils are out, and but few of the men of the Seven Saints are at hand to defend it."

While he spoke he carefully drew out the blade, and though its keen edge cut a little deeper into the side of the Don, bringing the blood once more, Estvan never winced.

"The American dog!" he hissed. "He shall pay dear for this—but not now. He is a man of nerve, and we may need him first. Which way has he gone; and is Mercedes safe?"

"No knowledge have I; but to learn, put Tomasso on the trail. He will find the end, no matter what lies there."

"Come, then. We must be off before the Americanos, if we wade through the herd's heart and measure weapons with Four Claw and all his band. Once he saved her. What woman could withstand him if he a second time saved her?"

Together the two hastily left the room.

CHAPTER XIX.

TEN MILES OF DANGER.

"You never speak without saying something, and generally it's wisdom," said Burton, confidentially, in response to the Donna. "I see there's only about twenty of them, and it seems like a pity to run from a little gang like that. If you and Si can do a little fighting on your own hook, and drop a couple, to make them feel squeamish over their job, I think I can provide for the rest. Yes, decidedly; you had best stay here. Give me saddle-room, and I will try to do the best I know."

Without waiting for a second invitation, Mercedes slipped from the mustang. Hardly had she touched the ground when Burton was in her place.

"Now for it!" he shouted, and turning his horse's head, he drove straight toward Four Claw and his men, who were coming on like a whirlwind.

The movement was a surprise, and consequently a puzzle.

In an instant every Indian had disappeared, though the mustangs still came steadily on. Only Burton, at close range, could see the paint-daubed faces that looked out from under each equine neck. He followed their lead somewhat, bending forward and crouching low in the saddle.

Then suddenly the mustang of the leading brave went headlong to the ground, as the sharp crack of a rifle sounded over the plain. The Donna was getting in her work while she had the chance, and showed herself a thoroughly good markswoman. Not every man could hit a horse at all at that distance and going at such a speed, and Mercedes had planted her bullet squarely in the center of the mustang's forehead.

As the animal lumbered to the ground, the brave who was hanging behind it dropped for its side with all the agility that one trained to such feats could have shown. So thoroughly did he keep himself covered that he was only visible for a second, as it seemed; then he settled down behind the dead animal, a corpse himself—Burton's eyes had been on him, and with a snap-shot the young man sent a bullet home, while the rifle of Mercedes was speaking again, and as surely as before.

At this the line swung around. Until something had been definitely settled among themselves the Apaches did not care to charge in on such desperate shooters.

And right there was where they made their mistake. Though it gave them a chance to fire more conveniently from under the necks of their animals it gave Burton a chance to use his revolvers; and he did some of the quickest, surest shooting that these sons of the saddle had ever seen from on horseback at a moving mark, and at such a range.

Bullet after bullet he sent, firing first at the mustangs and ponies, choosing a spot just behind the saddle, where a ball in the spine would tell quicker than one in the heart even. And whenever an Apache came in sight the same certain eye marked him for a stroke.

Sodder Si was for the present out of the game, since the Indians were well beyond the range of his revolvers. He simply crouched behind the barricade of flesh, and took notes of what was going on.

"'Pon me soul, it looks ez though he war a goin' ter run ther hull caboodle ov 'em," he chuckled. "It does me proud ter hev a pard ov sich sand. Let up on 'em, Donner, let up on 'em. Ef they find they can't git outen range ov

yer gun they won't run; an' I reckon it'll be a durned si'te more healthy ter let 'em get away ef they want ter. They won't want ter buck ag'in' this crowd quite ez bad ez they did—don't yer disremember of it!"

"There is something in what you say," answered Mercedes, coldly counting the empty shells, and recharging her rifle. "It will not do to call him back, yet I hope he will not venture too far. He is a brave young man, and a marvelous shooter."

"He's got sand ernuff fur a dozen; an' he does purty fair shootin'—tho' yer ort ter see Sodder Si at work. Yer notiss he on'y uses one hand at a time. Wot's ther use ov two hands an' two eyes ef a feller can't use 'em both ter oncet? Might ez well be a blinker with one heel."

"Quit, man; you make me sick. The one who can do better work than that is not the man that would brag of it."

"He does 'pear ter hev some git up an' git; but he's havin' Si purty much out in ther cold. Dog-gone him, he must think I like ter walk."

And while Sodder Si spoke the Donna gleefully clapped her hands. Burton had charged in, and with one hand lassoed a mustang, while with the other he shot the rider, who had ventured forward alone. Then she caught up her rifle, again to cover him as he retired with his capture.

There had been a merry little war, and the loss had been totally and surprisingly on one side.

The Apache force was not very large in the outset, and had grown beautifully less.

Still, such rashness as Burton's would hardly bear repeating; and there were enough of the Indians to make the odds even yet entirely too great for safety. Had they charged at once, while Burton was securing his prize, he would have been lost. The little delay gave him time to dash back with the mustang, by some marvelous witchery, running quietly and true by the side of his own horse.

"Good boy, ef Sodder Si hez ter say it!" came heartily from the lips of the tramp.

In full career Burton had swung himself from the back of his horse to the mustang. The young man's equestrianism was even more wonderful than his shooting.

"Get into my saddle!" exclaimed Burton, as he thundered up.

"They will be on us in a moment, and I must feel that you, at least, are safe."

"Thankee!" laughed Si, lunging forward. "We'll make 'em think that's a hull brigade ov cavalry. Good boy. I won't furgit yer!"

And to the amazement of Burton, the tramp was in the saddle before there was time for a word of reply, and darting past him with a whoop, in the direction of the Apaches.

"Let him go," said Mercedes, wildly. "I have an idea that he is not as bad as he looks. Certainly he has some scheme in his head."

"If I dropped him I could whistle my charger back," said Burton, coldly balancing the heavy revolver in his right hand, and thoughtfully taking note of the distance.

"Harm him not. Your bullets are for more needed use. See. If they ride him not down they will come for us."

A movement of some kind was evidently on foot; but Burton was not watching it. He heard a cheer behind him, and turning suddenly, saw two horsemen coming at breakneck speed; and the foremost one was Ike Partridge, with the bridle of Mercedes's Selim in his hand. Behind him was Dobbs, the lunatic, riding as bravely as the best of them.

"Now for home!" said the Donna, joyfully, as a moment later Burton swung her into her saddle.

"I wouldn't," responded Partridge, gloomily. "I haven't any doubt about your nerve, but I have in regard to the ability. These fellows in front are not holding up for nothing. While you've been fooling here there's a little army been coming up from the other side of the *motte*. I hate to run; but this time I think we had better get up and dust."

"And the ranch? *Santa Maria!* If they come in such force what will be left of it? If we were there we might save it. Through we must go; or die trying."

"The house will take care of itself. The herdsmen are there. They could not check the stampede, and they could not fight the Apaches, so they did the next best thing and started to look after the ranch. If they don't turn this thing into a regular siege we may circumvent the red fiends yet. Now, our best hold is to ride off and wait for them to clear the way, or a chance to get in from the other side."

Mercedes shook her head. Although there was reason in what Partridge said, she was not one of the retreating kind. With a little encouragement, she would have been willing to charge a brigade.

"Your friend, the vagabond, seems to be of that opinion, anyhow," interposed Burton, with a rueful sort of smile. "Yonder he goes, and under him the best piece of horseflesh I ever owned. If I ever help such a villainous scamp out of a neck-tie again I hope I may get the same reward."

Sure enough, the valiant Soldier Si was in full retreat, firing as he went, and a dozen or more Apache braves were chasing after his hair in that anxious haste those very earnest people usually exhibit under such circumstances. He sat in the saddle as though he belonged there; and rode the mustang as though he owned it. It looked as if no more help was to be got from him—though he was drawing off a good portion of the reds in their immediate front.

"Look," exclaimed the Donna, suddenly, and pointing beyond the further edge of the *motte*. "You were right. They are there, and coming. If we cannot fight we must flee; and the sooner we begin the better."

With a quick turn she headed her mustang away from the ranch, and chirruping to him was off without another word.

"Getting along nicely, ain't you, Billy?" said Partridge in an undertone, as he ranged up to Burton's side. "But do you know where we're going?"

"Up the flume, I suppose. I don't know any other decent ending for such a wild-goose chase."

"Don't be so down-hearted over it. If you mean it, I'll back your chances yet, though I've got a something on the bonanza, if the very Old Harry does seem to stand in the way of getting it. But that's neither here nor there. As I make it we're heading straight for Don Ramon's ranch, and he's a bad man from Bitter Creek, or somewhere 'way back; keep an eye out or he'll serve us a trick of some kind. She's foolish enough to believe in him; and he's no man's fool. If we could drop him among the Apaches it would help us out amazingly; but I hate to be mean."

"Oh, he's Kenyon's man. If he gets away with Charley we may as well retire. And as for his ranch, I've a kind of hankering to see the inside of it anyhow, and we're safe enough while the danger lasts. After that, though, we can look out for ourselves."

"All right. There about ten miles of danger where he don't come in, and I guess we'd better attend to that and let the Don's affairs go until he comes on the carpet. There come the 'Pash. I wonder how we are all mounted?"

It was a question worth considering—though the Apaches came on carefully, as though waiting for the rest of the force to come up.

As Mercedes and her friends forged past the *motte*, and the Ranch of the Seven Saints came into view, they saw that the buildings were encircled by a cordon of red rangers; while the swarm of dark heads that appeared above the main roof showed that the *vaqueros* had come in and the house did not lack defenders.

CHAPTER XX.

THE ROPE BREAKS.

THE little party rode on steadily, now and then casting a careless, backward glance at the Apaches, of whom there was by this time, a swarm in their rear, though the distance between remained about the same. The Donna and her escort were making no wild efforts, and those behind simply followed.

"I don't like it," whispered Partridge, when he saw the chance. "It looks too much like a round-up. There's a corral ahead, and a set of brands, unless these gentlemen in the rear have slipped up in their calculations a good deal harder than they usually do. I'm not so sure we wouldn't do more good on the outside than the inside of this ring."

"Time enough when the plant develops," responded Burton. "Look yonder. There is Ramon himself, large as life, and his gang with him. He will mean business from the word go, and I don't intend that he shall have a chance to get the inside track, if I can help it."

"Thunder and Mars! There he is. How in the name of creation did he get out? He looks sort of desperate like, as though he had been taking a sitting shot at Charley. Find out before the mud gets stirred."

Ramon and the trailer had lost no time. With a half-dozen men from his own ranch, whom he had stumbled upon as he rushed out, the Don had struck across the plain. Before attracting any attention he had got well to the front of the Apaches, though far off to the right flank of the fugitives.

Of course, as the Don and Mercedes were heading for the same point, they would all the time be coming nearer to each other: and unless there was immediate danger it was nonsense to fill in the gap at any reckless expense of horse-flesh. If the Don could beat the Indians in the race for his own ranch it was enough for the present.

And he did that. In the long, steady ride he forged more and more ahead, until, at last, he sprung lightly to the ground and stood upon his own doorstep, full five minutes before Mercedes came galloping up.

"Welcome to this haven of refuge," he said in his most courtly manner, bowing low, and almost sweeping the ground with his sombrero. "Be under no fear. Plenty of men are there left there to guard the Ranch of the Blessed Saints, and here you find yourself in that other home which will always be waiting to gladly receive thee."

He spoke in pure Castilian, dropping his voice

with his last words, and he would have been really impressive if he had not marred the effect by a sudden, fierce scowl at the Americans who stood at the Donna's shoulder. It was a little hard to pursue his love-making under the range of his rivals.

Mercedes smiled. Trust a woman for seeing all that was to be seen under such circumstances—though she could not guess of the little unpleasantness that occurred at her ranch.

"We came this time uninvited; but were sure of a welcome. Still, I think it would have been more for my interest if you had remained and looked after my affairs while I was away. From what I see I should judge that they will need it."

"Perish the ranch! I will rebuild it for you if it suffers; but what would stone and wood be to me when once I knew that you were in danger?"

"Danger? Don't be ridiculous. How could I be in danger with such a body-guard?"

Her hand swept around in a gesture that included Ike Dobbs as well as the Americans; and she smiled very sweetly on all three. If she did not set the Don crazy it was because he was carrying already all there was room for on his back, and the rest rolled harmlessly off. Indeed, from that moment he was ever so much cooler.

"Of course, of course. Yet when I thought you in danger I forgot all that. Enter now, You are at home. See. The danger is past. They fall back when they come face to face with men."

The Apaches had already drawn in; and now, as a charge of a dozen or fifteen men came swirling down upon them, they turned in apparent trepidation, and galloped back the other way, until well out of range.

"Thy invitation shall be accepted. Tired am I with ride and all that I have gone through. But see to it that good watch is kept, for yonder retreat is but a blind. They will be back again for work. When that time arrives you will find us ready to meet them. Come."

"Glad enough would we be," responded Burton, speaking hastily, "but things are hardly as safe as they seem, if I know anything about red-skins; our place is outside as long as any of them are in sight. When the last one skips you will find us all around; but meantime we have work to do, and the sooner we are at it the better. Go in and rest yourself; but as for us we'll see you later. We're off."

Burton spoke, but it was Partridge that had suggested the idea; while the Don listened, uncertain whether to be glad or sorry for the turn affairs were taking. Probably he did not really believe that they would go until the moment he saw them ambling off together with Dobbs in their train.

If the two had any idea of leaving the ranch they were not a moment too soon. The redskins were beginning to surround the place with the evident idea of preventing any one from making an exit. It might be that they feared that there was aid of some kind to be brought, but more likely they did not wish to give a single man a chance to get away.

They were just a shade too late, however. Before they could get fairly on the trail of the two young men they were half a mile away, slackening their speed and looking back at the buildings with a faint shade of regret on each face.

"Now, then, you have us out, and confounded little chance to get back, please expound. I don't want to be too previous, but if the fun don't pay for the risk, I'll feel very much like wringing your neck."

"Don't fret yourself about the fun; though there will be plenty of that, too. It's coin, principally, that I'm after. There couldn't be a better time to take to exploring than just right now. Everybody is cooped up and watching the 'Pash, and we can take our own good leisure to investigating Ikey's bonanza, and laying plans for future usefulness. They are all safe in there for the present, and about the time they need us we'll come back with a roll, and run things like little heroes. If we stayed there now, there's a mighty good chance of passing in our checks the first fly with Four Claw. I ain't choicey, but I swear I hate to be hit in the back."

"Plenty of wind and a grain of sense in all that. If Isaac wants to investigate let him lead on, and we can't do much better than to follow. Wonder what the Donna thinks? Bet you a big lemon she thinks we are going back to look after our pard—and she won't be so far out. I don't altogether like it that the Don comes and Charley stays behind. It would be a confounded sight more natural to see it the other way."

"Don't fret yourself about Kenyon. When the Don gets away with his luggage it will be another day—not this day or date."

While this conversation was going on they were still riding rapidly, following in the wake of Dobbs, who for once was saying nothing, though he kept his ears wide open and had pushed on ahead. His object was to first get out of sight, and then reach the locality of his supposed bonanza as soon as possible.

The first part was not so difficult a thing to do. There was nothing between them and the neighboring range but a little distance, and that

was soon covered. After that came the really trying part. The trail was narrow and difficult, winding among the hills in such a sinuous way that they had to cover twice the distance that a straight line would have required. No description would ever have enabled them to find their way, and it was plain that Ike Dobbs had been over every foot of the ground, and probably more than once.

"Thar's bin a airthquake ov sum kind sence ther fu'st time this hyar spot war found, an' thing's ain't ez they used ter wuz. We kin git down, but it ain't ary too pleasant a trail, an' I ain't never always too sure 'bout gittin' back. Yander's ther gulch ez leads ter glory; be yer ready ter swing over?"

"I should judge that we can follow wherever we have a leader; but one at a time ought to be enough. If the 'Pash have their eyes open as wide as they generally do, there's just a chance that they have been following at a respectable distance, and if they caught us all three down there, we'd get out—when the last horn blows, or somewhere about that time. If it's all the same, as it's Jim's deal I'll stay up here as a looker-out. And you see that there's no shenanigan, or there will be a dead Isaac. Now, propell."

The conversation explains the situation of affairs almost with sufficient fullness. In the mountain there was a great gash, the bottom of which was beyond sight, and could be rather riskily reached by means of the long lariat that Dobbs was uncoiling. When Ike threw himself carelessly over the brink, for answer Partridge showed no sign of hesitation, but with little prudence and a great deal of nerve followed, a good deal closer than the size of the rope and the difficulty of the descent seemed to render expedient.

He did not trust Mr. Dobbs any too much, and did not intend to allow him to get so far ahead as to be able to take a sitting shot at him as he came down the rope.

Burton had some such idea, also. He had remained behind ostensibly to watch for the Indians, but really paying very little attention to what might be on their trail. He was leaning far over the edge of the sheer precipice, a revolver clutched in his hand, while he peered downward after the two men on the rope.

There was a little hump, fifty feet below, against which the rope rested.

Behind this Ike disappeared. Then, just as Partridge was in the act of passing it, the rope snapped a short distance above him, and he disappeared with a suddenness that sent a cold chill down Burton's spinal cord, and brought forth from below a warning cry that was cut off exactly in the middle.

Then all was still as death. Not even a groan came up from the depths of the chasm.

CHAPTER XXI.

"ME TOO."

"STIDDY be jerks, ole hoss, an' thar'll be more ov yer, in better shape, when yer git thar. Meanwhile, ef Crazy Ike knows beans you've went an' gone an' done it, with a great big D, severall times over, an' a dash betwixt 'em. We're hyar."

"So I should judge," retorted Partridge, slipping nimbly from the arms that had deftly caught him, and broken what would otherwise have been a serious fall.

"An' we're like ter stay hyar. Ther rope's broke, an' I don't see no way ter git out."

"Buttons is up there," coldly replied the other, giving a toss of his thumb as he spoke. "You don't suppose he'll stroll away and forget to come back?"

"Ef he don't stroll he'll starve; ef he goes away he'll never find ther road over ag'in; an' ef he did we'd be gone up ther flume. I reckon we're elected."

"Don't be down-hearted, Isaac. You talk as though you really meant it; but there's always more than one way from the woods. As long as there are no bones broken we'll find an outlet. Hello, up there!"

The call was unfortunate. At that moment Burton was hanging on to the lower end of the rope, trying to make out what had happened below. The cry startled him, his grip slipped; and instantly the three were once more together.

"Take it easy, William, it's only a matter of fifteen or twenty feet, and the drop seems to hurt nobody. It's the going up that kills. We wanted the bonanza; now I should be willing to assert that the bonanza has got us. We'll see what it looks like before we get excited."

"Where are we, anyhow? Perhaps this is the usual way of coming down; but blame me if I'd take the chances again, unsight and unseen, for several bonanzas."

"There's the consolation of knowing that you won't have the offer. Now, keep cool, and see what the gods have in store for us. We're in an old mine that looks as though it hadn't been visited for a hundred years. It's a pity we didn't have sense enough to bring a few torches and a lantern along. What you can see is pretty much all outside, and there is where you don't generally find signs of color. Isaac, you're half a fraud, anyhow."

"Don't fret yerself 'bout Ike Dobbs; he ain't ez dumb ez he looks, not by half. Ef you ain't skeered, he ain't afeard, an' he'll hev ther torches again in the jerk ov a lamb's tail. How's that? Yer see, I laid in some stock when I began ter think erbout biz. It comes mighty handy now. 'Thout a light I wouldn't keer ter ventur' inter that hole myself."

While he spoke he was starting a fire by the aid of a little heap of dry wood which he pulled out from semi-concealment. In a moment the blaze was leaping up, several torches were lighted, and the three were moving toward the dark opening that drifted downward from their feet, apparently through the solid rock.

One deserted mine is a good deal like another one, after the approaches are passed. This one was like the rest of them, only it looked as though it might have been deserted a century ago.

"What made 'em throw up?" asked Burton, looking curiously around. "If the ore petered out for them I don't know that there's much more chance for us to find the vein. There's been work enough done here, but that don't say anything for the bigness of the strike. I've seen men grub for five years on just as good signs, and then not strike anything."

"Bet yer sweet life they had a reason fur it," confidently interposed Ike, as he snuffled around in a somewhat suspicious way. "Thar's what's ther matter. Behind them rocks you'll find bones. Mebbe it took 'em all, and mebbe it on'y skeered ther rest out; but when ther airthquake come it jest closed up ther prospect an' left everything shet till Crazy Ike found ther color. Mebbe ther 'Pash cleaned up what ther rocks didn't gether. They don't keer a cuss fur ther glitterin'. They'd sooner hev a sculp than a ton ov it."

"There's reason in what you say; but for all that the mine may be worked out. If it's not it's going to be no fool of a job to get our work in so that we can get the worth of our money and the right change back. If the good father Rocodo could be got in with us there might be a chance, but unfortunately he is on the other side."

"He's on ther side whar ther stamps are. If he thort thar war coin in it he'd drap Ramon like a hot pertater."

"And throw us just as cold. We can't get the dead medicine on him solid enough to trust him as far as you can see him, let alone behind your back. If we should happen to get out—"

"And how is that little stock operation to be effected? We haven't wings now; and by the time we get them they won't do us much good."

"Don't be so gloomy. Something will turn up, and it's as well to be ready to take advantage of it when it comes. As I was saying. If we happen to get out our best hold will be to take the Donna into the find. Whether she likes that black-faced whelp or not, I think we will find her square on the ground floor when it comes to business. What do you remark, Isaac? It's your lay-out, and you ought to have something to say."

"Pears ter me I've bin a-sayin' too blasted much, ez it are. Time we git her d'vided 'round 'mong a few more thar won't be much left fur nobody. Still, I'm in your hands, ez long ez yer play me fair. Take her in ef she'll come—"

"An' me too. I say, pard, yer wouldn't go back on Sodder Si? Jest freeze onter *him* yit, an' you'll hev a solid team."

The interruption was more than a surprise; and coming at such a time and under such circumstances made even the cool sharp jump. Any other place would not have seemed so strange, but how in the name of all that was wonderful could he happen upon them there?

"Old man, you'll try that on about once too often," said Burton, quietly returning his revolver. If I didn't intend that you should be hung as a horse-thief I think I would shoot you now. The world has no further need of you, and it is time for you to retire. If you want to do one good deed before your demise you might inform us how you got here."

"Ha, ha! Yer think ole Si's a fraud? You bet he ain't. He's jest ther clean, white article, every time. Yer wouldn't stan' much chance ef he hadn't dove under an' kim up on ther other side. Bless yer leetle souls, thar ain't much round the diggin's thet he ain't fly to, an' what he don't sabbe about this hyar bonanza it won't hurt yer ter do without. Bless yer soul, yer mustang's safe over Si's stable, an' mighty lively it war fur you two sharps thet she are. She brung me, an' when I see'd you in trouble I jest laid ter git yer out. Guess yer ain't too high toned ter foller a man like me."

"It's die dog or eat the hatchet, so swing out the best you got. If you are as good as your word, and I get a leg over my mare again, we'll call it square and start fresh. But you'll run into us once too often, and somebody 'll pick a trigger and send you out of the wet."

"I'm runnin' ther chances on that. Yer don't know me yit. When yer git down ter ther true innardness ov ths high-flyin' gerloot you'll jest sw'ar by Sodder Si. But be yer goin' ter take me in on ther bonanza? I'd like ter

know, 'cause ther's a heap ter learn 'bout it, an' you fellers ain't got ther p'int ov yer fu'st eye-oth cut yit."

Partridge gave a short laugh.

"Oh, I suppose. A lunatic, a tramp and two blasted fools—there couldn't be a brighter firm scared up from here to 'Frisco. Give us the points, lead us out of this man-trap, and consider yourself elected. I'll sell out my share cheap if you want to buy up stock, and keep or sell, I think morning will find me on the road out of the blasted country."

"Don't git discoredded. Ef it's coin yer arter, ther's lashin's ov it 'round loose: an' fur fun this hyar country can't be beat. I'll tell yer more 'bout it when we git inter camp. Can yer swim?"

"Like a rock. What's that got to do with it? There don't look to be water enough to drown a cat-bird in all this country."

"Thar's ernuf ter make it cussed unwhole-some fur sumbody ef yer don't. It's too deep ter wade, an' ef thar's ary way ter git out 'thout it I ain't seen it."

"You couldn't go round and throw us a rope down, I suppose?"

"Take a day ter git thar, that's all. By that time yer mou't be hyar; an' yer mou'tn't. Ef so you'd be, too hungry ter die, I don't reckon yer goin' ter die fur clean lack ov sand. Ef yer be I don't want yer, an' yer kin. Ef yer been't—foller yer leader, an' see whar yer kin out at. Thar's a straight an' narrer way outer yer trouble an' ef yer don't take it ye'r' lost."

Without waiting for an answer Sodder Si turned back toward the dark corner from which he had emerged, and pointed at what seemed to be a pocket in the rock.

"Thar's water thar," he said. "Ef yer want ter see how deep an' how fur it goes that's jist one way, an' this are it."

And headlong he went, into the narrow pool.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DON'S GREETING.

HARDLY had the tramp time to disappear when Burton nonchalantly followed.

It was crowding the mourners a little closely, for if anything happened to Sodder Si in the narrow passage he claimed to exist there would be little show left for the other.

He had his reasons, however; and ran his chances.

Cool as he was Burton felt a thrill of delight when he arose once more to sunlight, and found himself in a little pool, almost a duplicate of the one he had lately left.

The water was cold enough to strike a chill to his bones, and he did not delay in scrambling out; and even as he came he looked sharply around. The vagabond had a trick of disappearing as suddenly as he came; and just now Burton wanted him badly.

Sodder Si, however, seemed to have no intention of running away. He sat there, with the water dripping off his garments in little rivers, and a comical grin on his battered phiz.

"That's right, tumble out," he mumbled. "It'll leave more room fur the rest. Yer pard 'll come sure ernuff, but I ain't a bettin' much on that crazy Ike. Ef he ain't got ther grit ter try ther rifle he kin stay thar. Ther's biz in ther air, an' you fellers had better be a-sniffin' at it."

"Don't fret yourself about Isaac. A man that can pit a fowl is good enough for anything; and here he comes."

He reached out and caught Dobbs by the collar as he spoke; and from the kindly way the heeler took the delicate attention no one would have guessed that Partridge had driven him to the dive at the muzzle of his revolver, and then followed after a brief interval of waiting.

"Now, ef you fellers say honor bright, ye'r' all on ther squar', an' won't never squeal, I'll take yer to my lay-out an' make yer comfortable. Ef yer don't want ter gi'n me yer hands, say so, an' you kin take keer on yerselves. Mebbe you kin find yer way out, and mebbe yer can't; but anyway ole Sodder wouldn't be a bad man ter have in ther famby."

"There isn't anything stuck-up about us, Silas. We'd just as soon take your hand as any other man's, ef we hold aces enough and there's money enough behind it to pay expenses."

"Good ernuf; an' ef Ike don't act squar', shoot him fur me. You've see'd 'bout all that's ter be see'd 'round hyar; an' ther sooner yer git back to ther ranch ther better. I'll look after yer hosses on t'other side of ther kenyon, an' you kin ride a couple ov mine tell it's convenient ter trade back. This-a-ways. Thar's a fire an' suthin' warm not fur off."

The day was well toward its close, and the evening air, despite the glow of sunshine still lingering in the west, was raw and cold. Rather more silent than was usual with them, they followed, traversing a narrow path that led downward into a mountain-pocket.

To their surprise they found there not only a stout little cabin, but a herd of half a dozen mustangs which seemed to own Si as their master.

There was no other human being in sight, and they entered the cabin without delay.

The vagabond's quarters were rude, but he

lived in comfort. His larder was not to be despised, as the three hungry men thought a little after, as they sat down to a hearty meal, of which broiled steak was the *piece de resistance*.

Dobbs had little to say. For once his ready tongue was silenced, and he was content with eying his host in a surly, suspicious sort of way that amused the Americans. They had never lost their *sangfroid*, and appeared to be in the best of spirits.

"You fellers ain't neither sugar nor salt," Si began, after the viands had been treated with ample justice, "but I reckon yer know ernuff ter go in outen ther damp when it rains. That Ramon's no slouch ov a feller. He got ther turn on me, ez yer know; an' ther man that kin do that's good fur a heap when he hez a good ready. I'll set yer on ther trail, an' Ike kin guide yer back. Ez fur ther bonanza—when ther 'Pash biz are settled, an' Estvan hez his gruel, I'll put yer up to ther p'ints. That'll keep, an' ther rest won't."

Everybody looked damp and bedraggled; but there was no time to consider appearances, and very little for talk. Si had nothing further to say, and his advice, as he had laid it down, was accepted without hesitation. He brought up the mustangs, including the one belonging to Burton, which he had appropriated at the *motte*, and when all were mounted, led the way for an hour without saying a word. After that the two sports had a great deal higher opinion of the tramp than ever; and somewhat more of faith in Ike's bonanza, and less in Dobbs himself.

It was a hard pelt they took, after leaving the mountain, and finally they approached the ranch of Don Ramon with considerable caution.

To their surprise the Apaches had vanished from sight, and the plain around the buildings seemed entirely deserted, save by a few patrols, whom, in even that uncertain moonlight, they recognized as being of Estvan's retainers.

"The frolic seems to be over; and the Don will have a clean swing. It may not be as easy to get in as it was to get out. Keep an eye open. His men may have orders to shoot on sight."

There was nothing like fear in Burton's tones. What he said was only a very natural suggestion, though in spite of the danger hinted at no one drew rein at all. They just darted straight on toward the building.

And hardly had he ceased speaking when he and Partridge disappeared. They heard the click of half a dozen gun-locks, and then a volley swept over them, as they hung, Indian fashion, sheltered behind their galloping steeds.

For a moment Dobbs sat bolt upright; then he gave a great cry and pitched heavily from the saddle. The others had saved themselves; but he had caught a bullet that seemed to have been aimed but too well. As he dropped half a dozen men, sprung directly into their path from the ground where they had been lying.

The three mustangs tore on, but of the riders Dobbs was groaning on the ground, while the two sports were on the ground also, but unhurt, and with revolvers out. Their assailants had naturally turned as the horses swerved and then swept by.

Now, in their rear, they heard a sharp, stern voice:

"Hands up and fingers empty—quick! We don't want to drill yer, but if you know friends no better than that we'll have to. You hear me, say?"

And as if in echo another voice ground out:

"It's not worth your while to kick. We have the deadliest kind of a drop, and we know how to use it. Make a move and the fancy shooting begins."

It was not strange that a cry of surprise arose. The men were all recklessly bold, but they were not fools, nor apt to do a rash thing in the surprise of the moment.

It was, indeed, almost like witchcraft, the way the sports had flung themselves down and then covered them from the rear.

For an instant he was silence. Then there was a reply, in something of a hesitating tone:

"Pardon, senors, there has been some mistake. Your voice we recognize, but we had thought surely that it was of the rustlers. They have driven the Apaches away, but they are the worser fiends themselves, and would have sacked the ranch had they not gone off in pursuit of Donna Mercedes. Heaven grant that they do not overtake her!"

"Of the Donna! Surely she did not venture out again, after such a narrow escape."

"Foolish was she, but nothing would do her but that she must return to the Seven Saints. And the Don has gone with her."

"Ah, I see. And left orders that we were to be potted when we returned. Well, you have done your best to follow orders; as we will certify to the festive Ramon when we meet him. You've done for poor Ike, I suppose—and there was nothing special in for him, after all. That's the way luck always runs."

"He's not so very dead," interrupted Partridge. "If they'll take him up tenderly, and carry him to the ranch I wouldn't wonder if he came around all right in the end. If he don't, we'll come back and clean up the score. If he

does, we'll let this go as a mistake. Here. Four of you men take a blanket and carry him in: and be mighty careful about it. Your lives hang on his. I never say anything I don't mean."

"Si, señor. He shall be cared for of the best. But you, yourselves. Whither will you go?"

"To the Seven Saints. No more talk now, but do. My fingers itch to cut loose. If we had not work on hand that is more pressing there would be no more ambuscades in this region."

"And no back talk," added Burton coldly, all the time covering his friend as he examined the condition of the luckless Dobbs, who now groaned feebly, and showed other signs of returning consciousness.

"The will of the señors shall be our law, though he has mistaken greatly. No harm would we have thought to do to him had we only known."

"Yes."

"Known that we could get away with the baggage of you and your gang. Enough, that is right. Handle him tenderly."

The Mexicans seemed to be cowed; and only too anxious to make the best of the situation.

Softly they raised Dobbs up and bore him away, keenly watched by the two who never for a moment trusted their professions. When they had gained a fair offing, Burton gave a shrill whistle.

"Lucky that Sodder Si turned over my mustang. With a strange brute we would have stood a rare chance to reach the Seven Saints on foot, if we got there at all."

"Here they come, though. Nothing like horseflesh that you can depend on. It will help you over the ripple every time."

Fearlessly the animals came tearing back; and into the saddle sprung the Sports. Before the figures of the Mexicans had altogether vanished in the darkness the two were swinging along the trail that led to the Ranch of Mercedes.

CHAPTER XXIII.

TAKEN AT HIS WORD.

FOR a few moments the two horsemen dashed along in silence; and in that time had covered nearly a mile.

Then Partridge drew up without warning, so sharply that an ordinary rider might have been unseated at the brusque stoppage.

"Say, Buttons, if we were sold for what we think we're worth, and then again for what we are, what do you think would be the difference in the two transactions?"

"What's got into you now? I guess it would be an even exchange all around."

"Not very much it wouldn't; when we can be sold out like this. How much truth do you suppose there is in that yarn we were just loaded up with?"

"I should judge that there was at least a good substratum."

"What's the matter with it?"

"Nothing much, except that it ain't true. I think that so strongly that one of us is going back to get to the bed rock."

"Ahem! That's a suggestion. If one of us goes I guess he'd better take the other along. I wonder if Ananias had more nerve than that infernal Mexican. Of course you'll shoot him on sight!"

"I don't see that it is my job any more than yours. It will be time enough to consider that when we see the surroundings. It is settled that we hark back?"

For answer, Burton wheeled and struck out. Under the dim moonlight the ominous frown on his face was barely visible, and the short, hard laugh that he gave was scarcely an index to his real feelings.

Partridge knew them though, and asked no further questions.

Burton would be just behind him, if not abreast of him; and would leave it to him to shape their course. He did look back; but the glance was not at Burton. Something on the plain had caught his eye. When he spoke it was with a quiet chuckle.

"If yer want to see our friends, the Apaches, you can do it without getting a foot nearer to the Seven Saints. They're all there, as thick as we left them. It begins to look like a double trap. If old Four Claw ain't carrying water on both shoulders I can't read the signs of the times. He's in with the Don, and he backs Des-tajo's game. How's that for perpendicular?"

"I see. If the herders didn't take us in, Four Claw was to do for us. The Don is a genius. If we run through both ruffles, he will no doubt be waiting at the ranch to make it pleasant for us. The prospects are good for a lively time, and you can call me a Dutchman if I don't do my best to hold my end up. If we don't strike another ambuscade soon I believe the best plan would be to run the mustangs loose and go on to the house on foot. We may lose the horses; but we'd do that anyhow if we tried to ride up. The brutes! they don't care where they hit when they begin to sling lead."

"Correct you are, from A to Izzard. Four Claw will keep his distance till the game is all set, and we'll run the risks here and now. Hop off and we'll turn loose."

The two rolled out of their saddles.

"Stay there!" said Burton, slapping his animal softly on the neck.

Then they strode away toward the house. Lead and lying had both failed to send them away, and they thought that the effort had not been made for nothing.

If they had taken the trouble they might have discerned a line of dark forms advancing in their wake. As the distance was quite respectable it was for the present not at all necessary, so their attention was altogether centered on the building.

And whether it was chance or good judgment that had led Partridge to draw his conclusion, he was wonderfully correct. Donna Mercedes was still at Don Ramon's ranch, and in the distance the Apaches were still lingering.

Not that the Donna was as yet in any sense a prisoner. The Apaches were of course enough to prevent her venturing from the protection of the buildings, unless impelled by some strong motive; but so far there was nothing to show that she could not go if she chose.

The Don did not seem very anxious over the state of affairs. He rather appeared to enjoy it. He had Mercedes at last as a visitor, and though the situation was a forced one, he did not care how long it lasted, provided it grew no worse.

It was true that the garrison was not very large, but he had his reasons for believing that there would be no direct attack, and meantime, whatever might happen to the stock of his visitor, his own were, he believed, for the most part out of the line of danger. And while Four Claw was lying in front, even if he was inclined to harry the Don, he was not getting in his work.

Mercedes had seen the three ride away with a careless laugh. From that time on until darkness began to come down she gave no sign that she remembered their existence. Then for a little while, she began to wish for them.

Four Claw had kept at a respectable distance, as though overawed by the bold front of the small force that was facing him. As sundown drew near he pushed closer and closer, the Mexicans falling back, and it began to look as though there was warm work not very far ahead. The Don mounted his horse and galloped out to his line, and there was a brisk fusilade for a few minutes.

Then the Indians fell back with a suddenness that evidently had a better reason than the chances of the fight, as far as they had developed.

Mercedes, watching from the roof of the ranch, saw the cause.

From the flank of the Apaches, as they faced Ramon, there came a hoarse shout, and a thud of hoofs. Charging out of the shadows a dozen men rode straight at the Indian line.

The force was not so large; but the men were more than ordinary men, since the Apaches did not wait to meet them, but were off in instant retreat, while Ramon, just as promptly, withdrew in the opposite direction. With magic swiftness the plain was vacant of all but the little knot of new-comers, who huddled together for a brief time, and then, heading for the ranch of the Seven Saints, galloped away, without another glance at the Ramon Ranch.

Mercedes met the Don at the threshold.

"Who were those?" she said, puzzled by the respect in which they had been held by both sides.

The Don hesitated to answer; and when he did speak it was in a low voice, that reached no other ears but those of Mercedes.

"I thought it was not for nothing that those Americanos appeared. These are like enough for all to be of the same stamp. If thou hast heard of Red Roderique thou wilt know why the red-men fell back. Rather would they meet with a hundred troops than a dozen of the hard-shooting Americanos that ride behind him."

"Red Roderick. Ah, yes, I have heard the name. He is an outlaw, and has a band as bad as himself. Rustlers they call them, though thieves is the plainer and better name. What do you suppose is their object here?"

"Plunder, of course. If they can get upon the trail of the cattle that the Indians stampeded, rest sure that not a hoof of them will ever again be seen."

"Then Four Claw has not done as much harm as he thought. If they keep on as they were heading when last we saw them, no trace of them will the rustlers find."

"But they may take a notion to attack this ranch, instead. Or thine own, since there is no sign of cattle to be had. They are reckless. Let me leave thee for a little. Tomasso's opinion is worth the knowing, and if it is such as should be heard, I will return at once."

The Don left her to hold a conference with his right-hand man, and did not return for some time.

There were no signs of the presence of either Apaches or rustlers; but when her loneliness began to be oppressive, the Donna heard the rattle of fire-arms, from a direction exactly opposite to that whence she would have expected it.

At that the Don came back to her, uttered a few words of encouragement, and would per-

haps soon have been whispering something else, had it not been for a buzz of excitement outside, that drew him away. The men who were bearing the wounded Dobbs were there.

After that there was more excitement, though the Don carefully concealed from her who the man was.

"It is one wounded in a sudden brush with the Apaches, who still linger near. I have had him carried to the rear of the building, where are rooms in which he can be well taken care of. Thou canst see him in the morning. His wounds are but trifling."

"Thanks. I doubt if I care to see him; but, as he has suffered somewhat in my behalf, I shall see that he is well paid if he lives, and if he dies, there shall be no stint of masses for his soul. But between you and me I could wish that the Americans were here. It looks to me as though there would be more than a holiday; and though they are impudent enough, we know that they have courage and skill. I trust you of course, and know that you will do all that one man can do; but I would feel all the safer if we had three more to aid us."

"To aid us, yes. But to have them as secret foes within the walls? That were more of danger than all the rest. No guests of mine should they be while this danger lasts. The wolves! The devils!"

"Be not so harsh. What harm have they done thee? And for me—they have saved my life already more than once."

"Saved it because it was of value to them. Oh! I know them and their plans. They would rob me and thee. Greater villains never drew breath, and out of their own mouths can I convict them."

"They scarcely look like men who, if they had a secret, would betray it, even under the thumbscrew and rack."

"But it was to one another. By chance I overheard enough to let me know of the vile plan."

"Then tell it. Forewarned I will be forearmed, and if they appear once more we can safely accept the assistance that we so much need."

The Donna threw any amount of power into her words by the emphasis she put upon the "we." Really, it sounded as though she proposed a partnership for the purpose of outwitting the three handsome sharps at the end.

"It is thy money they are after—by fair means or foul. One of them—they care not which—would marry thee. Failing in that, they would take possession of the ranch, or bear thee off to hold for ransom. When I charged one of them with the scheme he made at me like mad, and by a sudden, treacherous thrust, pinned me to the wall. Had it not been for the arrival of Father Rocodo he would have slain me. Oh! I know them all, and only for the debt thou hast spoken of—the saving of thy life—I would slay them where I find them."

There was the suspicion of a smile about the corners of the lovely mouth of Mercedes. It might mean encouragement—it might mean something else.

"Dost thou wonder, then, that I say into thy house or mine they do not enter again, save over my dead body?"

"Stretch out the corpus, then, and if possible lay it convenient to the window. We are coming now, and there is no time to lose."

The two sports had eluded the vigilance of all the sentinels, and reached the window, through which, as Burton ceased speaking, Partridge bounded.

CHAPTER XXIV.

KENYON STRIKES FROM THE SHOULDER.

WHILE matters were shaping themselves as has been detailed, Charley Kenyon had found his hands fairly full; and had carried his corner with all the *insouciance* for which he was justly noted.

When he had rushed away, after pinning the Don to the wall, it had been his intention to go to the rescue of Mercedes at once.

No doubt he would have done so but for the remembrance of Luilla. If the Apaches were near, and in force, it was hardly fair to leave one lady in danger to go to the rescue of another, who might be abundantly able to take care of herself. He decided that he would at least see how the land lay, before altogether deserting the ranch.

Fortunately he caught sight of the flitting form of Luilla, and at once followed her. She looked over her shoulder once, and he knew that she was aware that he was following. After that, of course, it would not do for him to turn back. In another minute he stood beside her on the roof, and the plain lay stretched out before and beneath him, like a vast panorama.

At a glance he saw that his place was there, and not in the hurly-burly. It was more than doubtful if he could reach the side of Mercedes without cutting his way through the ranks of the Apaches, and he saw that his friend was there, to do the best that one man could; and against such odds it was doubtful if two could do much more. Retreat was the one thing to save the Donna, and his presence would hardly aid in that.

By the time that the Don had been able to escape from the plight in which Kenyon had left him and had got into his saddle the way to the *motte* was altogether closed by a living wall, and when Kenyon saw him dash off in the direction of his own place he believed that he was looking out for his own safety, gave a grim smile, and then thought no more about him. As for the padre, he had disappeared so suddenly and completely that there was not room for a guess, even, in what direction he had gone.

By this time half a dozen men had joined them on the roof. They were the garrison proper of the ranch; men who were always on duty when not relieved by others of the detail. At the Seven Saints there was a very fair military system, and all that was lacking just now was a recognized leader. The Donna was away, Rocodo was away, and Diego was away. Beyond these there seemed to be no directing power; yet it was necessary that some one should come to the front.

Luilla turned to the American. She was as cool as could be, though she recognized all the danger to both herself and her mistress.

"Some one must take command, why not you? The men will have confidence in you, and without a leader all will be lost. I will stay here, but go you down and rally the men below. See! They are making a good fight over yonder, and even if taken it will be all the better for them if we are saved. Can we trust to you?"

"While I live, yes. After that you can say your prayers. There will be no other hope left. I will see what is to be done below and be back in a moment."

He darted away even while he spoke leaving Luilla to give a few hurried directions and then watch with breathless interest the rapidly-shifting scenes below.

As yet the Apaches had made no demonstrations in the direction of the house, their attention being altogether turned to the drama beyond the *motte*; and Kenyon found the force that was gathered under the walls was waiting very composedly for events to develop their future course of action. There was less excitement than he had expected to see; and no one was badly frightened.

"The Donna is well mounted, and with the aid she has with her will be safe enough," said Kenyon, striding forward to the nearest group.

"There is force enough here to defend the ranch against any attack, but we must be ready for it if they are rash enough to make it. They must be kept scattered, and at a distance, as long as possible. Half a dozen men here will be ready to charge out in case we see that the Donna is making an effort to break through—it is too late to go to her rescue now. If all this force had been together at first something might have been done. The men inside will see that the house is ready for defense in case we have to seek its shelter. The rest will form a skirmish line around the ranch, at as great a distance as they can cover, and hold it until the Apaches drive them in by weight. As there is no one else here who seems willing to assume command I will do so until some one comes who has more skill or a better right to the post."

Kenyon gave his directions hurriedly, but in the tones of one who was sure of himself and that he would be obeyed. He spoke the language of his hearers as well as Mercedes did his own, and his words were both understood and obeyed. For the present he was clearly acknowledged as the commander of the post.

The alacrity with which the men took hold of their work was so satisfactory that Kenyon soon had nothing better on his hands than to return to Luilla.

A few moments more and he had the satisfaction of seeing that only a few of the Apaches remained in sight, apparently only for the purpose of observation, while the rest went trooping off in the wake of the Donna and her supporters.

"That relieves us," said Kenyon, carelessly. "By the time they get through with that chase they won't care whether the ranch of the Seven Saints is here or not."

"But what will become of Mercedes? Truly it seems like cowardice for us to be sitting here in safety, while she is in such deadly danger. Could we not beat off these in the front and then go on to her rescue?"

"She has Buttons with her, my dear, and Jim Partridge has joined them. Jim may take a notion to pilot them into 'Frisco; but wherever he strikes for, you can bet the limit that the reds won't catch up."

"That may be; but then, what is to become of me?"

"You have your humble servant, ready to die for you or with you. Is not that sufficient to satisfy any reasonable woman?"

Luilla looked as though either arrangement would scarcely be satisfactory.

"If I die with you I can't see that you are much benefit, and if you die for me you are certainly none at all. I do not believe that Four Claw has any idea of attacking the ranch; and if you were half as good a man as you pretend to be you would take me to Mercedes.

How can I stay here alone? Don Ramon would know what to do in such a case."

"Precisely. But the Don has run away; and if he hadn't I would have been compelled to kill him; so, you see, there is no use to bring him into the question. We must stay here and protect the ranch. These men would run like frightened sheep if they had no leader. When the Donna returns I will be happy to escort you to any point of the compass you may suggest."

"When Mercedes returns I will want to stay here; so you will have lost your chance," retorted Luilla, with a quizzical sort of grimace.

"Not at all, for I shall stay too, until you want once more to travel. Then I promise you, I will be on hand."

"Don't be two previous. It appears to me that you are getting along entirely too rapidly with your wooing—if that is what you call this impudence of yours."

The old-fashioned ring came back into Kenyon's laugh, as he answered:

"I guess you're not far wrong in the name. Sorry that the season is not more propitious. Anyway, you won't call it impudence by the time this frolic is over. There are oceans of fun ahead, if I know anything about the season! Ta, ta. I'll see you later."

Leaving her there Kenyon strode away again, and down the stairs, at the foot of which he met the boy he had nicknamed Jehosophat.

The youngster caught him by the skirt of his coat as he was brushing past.

"Senor, keep both eyes open," he said, in a low tone. "News has come from the padre; and I doubt if it means you any good. They all hate you but me."

"Thanks for the warning; but I'm generally around. I don't want to salivate the poor wretches; but if they try any of their gum-games I'm afraid I shall have to do it, just for an example. Get my horse out, I want to make the grand round."

"Si, senor; in a moment."

The boy ran one way; Kenyon strode the other. As the latter stepped out he caught a glimpse of three crouching figures, and heard the muttered words:

"Ah, the dog of an American! He comes."

"You bet he comes," sung out Kenyon, gayly, swinging out his right fist as he spoke.

The three men were almost on him, as, all together leaped at him; but his blow caught the central one on the end of the nose and sent him down quicker than if he had been shot.

Then, with a quick dart, he caught the other two, each by the throat, and with a giant swing knocked their heads together, wrenched them from their feet and crushed them to the ground.

"Come, my friends," he said, coolly. "I must know the inwardness of this. What were you coming at me for?"

"It is a mistake, senor," gasped one of the men.

"No intention had we to harm thee. Why should we when thou art our friend?"

"Eh. That's just what I want to get at. If you wanted to try it on, as you certainly did, there must be a reason for it. I'll give you just ten seconds to explain. I'll count ten, and then, if I don't know, there will be two more dead Greasers, and perhaps three."

He held them, a neck under either knee, and while he spoke he drew his pistols, and as a cold muzzle pushed against each brow he began his count.

Before he had reached half a dozen both men weakened.

"Hold, senor, be not so hasty. It was the good father, Miguel but now came from him, with orders for us two to place thee where thou couldst do no harm."

"And where is the holy father?"

"Miguel can tell. We asked no questions. Ask him if it be not so."

"Don't you move then, if you don't want to go to kingdom come. I'll interview him. Ah. By heavens, I hit harder than I meant—or, was it the fall? Miguel will never tell, for I have broken his neck."

It was a fact. The Mexican lay huddled up in a heap on the ground, just where he fell. He had given a convulsive movement or two, and then rapidly stiffened in death.

It was a terrible warning to the other two, and as they arose Kenyon could see that they were white and trembling.

"I may as well trust you," he said, as he saw Jehosophat bringing up his mustang. "Your horses are convenient?"

"Si, senor."

"Then you will mount them and follow me. I must see what is the meaning of this play. There is a game somewhere and I intend to know who deals and what is his limit."

And with the two men who had just been seeking his life as the only escort, Kenyon dashed away.

CHAPTER XXV.

DON'T TOUCH THE OX.

KENYON took his position quite coolly. The two men doubtless had no great love for him, and would be willing, not only to desert him, but to turn their hands against him should the chance occur to do it without danger to them-

selves. For all that he ambled away on his rounds without any hesitation, and the men in his wake followed, shaking their heads. They did not fancy the possibility of meeting the padre in company with this cool American; and they were afraid to cross his will after the specimen they had lately had of the way he met opposition.

"Can you stay here a few moments?" he asked earnestly, when they had ridden some distance out upon the plain. "Not that it makes much difference. If you leave, the 'Pash will kill you; and if they don't, I'll see to doing the job myself. I want to find you here when I get back. That's all."

"The senor jests. We are his to command. If he comes not for a year he will find our bones where he left us."

"Stay there, then, till you hear from me. I will see what there is beyond."

The two Mexicans meant what they said—for the present. With a word and a touch they made their well-trained mustangs lie down; and when Kenyon looked over his shoulder he could just make out their dusky forms as they crouched where he had left them.

At almost racing speed he rode for some distance. Then, suddenly halting, he threw himself from the saddle, and crept along on foot. He had observed that no Indians had appeared on a certain part of the plain, and he wanted to know more about the reason why.

He knew that, just there, there was a great gash in the ground, where, not far from the ranch, started a barranca, that grew deeper and deeper, until it changed, in the distance, into a regular canyon.

It was possible that the rift in the prairie might hold some secrets; and Kenyon was bent on obtaining as many points in the game as possible. His mustang, also, was thoroughly well trained, and he left it without any hesitation.

A few paces and he strode down into a little gully. After that his progress was slower and more cautious. He knew well enough that he was liable any moment to fall into an ambuscade, but so far there was no danger of a flank movement, or of being taken from the rear. For anything else he was ready.

"I don't think the Greasers will have pluck enough to follow," he muttered. "If they don't I guess I can keep a line of retreat open. If there's any set-up job, with Rocodo in it, I'll be apt to find the signs of it here. What the worthy Rocodo is after is worth the knowing now; and I'm going to know it or lose my hair."

For fully three hundred yards he followed the widening cleft before he found or heard anything that indicated the presence of any one else in the gulch.

Then it seemed to him that he heard voices, as of some one speaking in a low tone, and he halted to listen.

He could make out the voice quite distinctly then, though the words were unintelligible. How far off in the darkness the speaker was remained to be tested. Far enough, no doubt, not to be interrupted by the slight sound of his light footsteps.

"Rocodo for a million," thought Kenyon, and carefully, but without hesitation, he began to make his way nearer.

Some little distance further on he was surprised at seeing a gleam of light. The slight turns in the trend of the barranca had hitherto hidden it. Now he knew that he had not much further to go. He dropped upon his hands and knees, and waited to see if he could now make out the drift of the conversation that had attracted his attention.

The little distance that he had come had added in a surprising way to the distinctness with which he could hear; and the speaker was Rocodo himself.

"True is it as thou hast spoken," he was saying, "but for terms in this matter I can deal only with thy leader, Red Roderique himself. Why has he not come here to meet me? My neck was risked for the loop since I had promised him to be here. Can it be that he is a coward? If so he is not the man for me."

"Never heerd ov ther boss backin' water, ef all ther snags in ther rivyer war sharp end up. He couldn't git hyar; that's 'bout ez cl'ar ez I kin make it. Ef I sed more it wouldn't more ner amount ter ther same thing."

"Frightened out by this mob of the accused Apaches no doubt," sneered the padre. "Had I known all, I would have made terms with them beforehand. Now it is too late. I should fear to trust them."

"Coward yerself. Ther' ain't ther man livin' ez kin make Rod take a back seat fur the want ov a load-up ov pure sand. When he gits hyar ye'll find things 'way up an' lively. Now, ef yer wants ter kin ter t'arms spit her out afore I skip. I ain't stayin' hyar long; an' ef yer ain't got nothin' ter perpose afore I leave don't yer worry. We're hyar now, an' there's money in it. We'll jest go in on our own hook."

"Red Roderique I have seen, but thee I know not. To him only can I speak, since his word only would I trust. Until he comes I have nothing to say."

"Mighty bad, then, fur you, boss. We allers means biz; an' when a party makes a move

onc't thar's no back down, an' no git out. You an' me kin just stay hyar, comfortable like, till ther rest ov ther gang comes. Then, ef yer don't talk we'll jest hang yer, an' wipe up ther ranch on our own hook. You h'ar me? Set still, er down yer go. Thar's a weepin at yer ear, an' a finger on ther trigger. I reckon I hes yer foul."

The speaker had evidently caught the drop on the padre; and from the earnestness of his tones it was pretty certain that he meant to keep it.

Rocodo did not pretend to cope with him in that direction, though he had other thunders that he would try before giving way to despair.

"Sacrilegeous fool! Woudst thou lift thy hand against one for whom harming vengeance would follow to the end of the earth? Pause a moment and remember that it is not the arm of flesh that Rocodo must alone rely on. If man cannot protect, heaven will avenge."

"Reckon, ef that's yer best hold, you'll kin out behind. Thar's sich a big 'count strung up ag'in' me that that ain't no use ter be afeard ter add a leete thing like a throat ov a padre to ther reecord. Jest you squirm a leetle crooked, an' see how soon you'll go over ther range."

"I this the faith that I should have looked for from Red Roderique? I met him as man to man, and we were to have met here this night again, to finish the matter we had in hand. What is thy purpose? Tell me plainly."

The father got down from his high horse suddenly enough. There was no mistaking the language of the rustler. He did not care a particle whether there was slaughter or not; and if there was he would just as soon it should begin with a padre as with any other man.

And he was not at all ashamed to tell to Rocodo his intentions.

"Ef yer hed stuck ter ther fu'st letter ov yer tune, an' not asked Red Rod ter chip in ter ther help ov Rocodo ag'in' ther mighty, yer mou't afford ter put on side now. Ez it are we don't trust yer, an' I hed orders ter kin hyar, git yer game, an' then hold you if it didn't fit in with oun. Thet's just what I'm doin'. We've hed ernuf chin now, we'll just reetire down ther ray-vine, tell we git outside ov ther 'Pash, an' then lay 'round tell-wal, tell ther boss kims, er suthin' happens."

"I begin to believe—"

The padre began thoughtfully, then held his peace, as though, perhaps, it would be best for him to keep his ideas to himself.

"Yer begins ter b'lieve what?" asked the other.

"That you are not one of Red Roderique's men at all."

"Ha, ha!" laughed the man. "Thar's nothin' like hevin' a he'd. So yer hez yer s'picions? All right. Ef yer live long ernuf, chances is ye'll find out. Mebbe we'll take in ther three sports; mebbe it'll be you ez'll drop. Wait an' you'll know. Now, kin along."

All this time Rocodo had been casting anxious glances toward the upper end of the canyon whenever he saw a chance to, as he thought, do it unperceived; and meantime he was talking to gain time. Kenyon understood, and smiled grimly to himself. If the padre was hoping that Miguel would come to his aid, he was not taking into account the impossibility of mending a broken neck.

Rocodo hesitated. The muzzle of the revolver threatened him with present death; and it looked very near. What might happen in the future was uncertain. Was it best to risk the nearer and known danger for fear of the further off? If only Miguel would come. He had not timed his affairs very well, and yet, how could he know? When he sent Miguel away he did not expect him back for hours later than this, but now he thought he should already be there.

While he was considering, Kenyon was thinking.

"A righteous retribution, if ever there was one. Rocodo is caught in his own trap. He was bidding for an assassin; and it is tolerably plain that the banditti he has bargained for are here; but to play their own game. After all, they will hardly harm him, and if they do, he has taken his own risk with the edge tools. I think the best thing I can do is to gracefully retire. There will be more fun around the ranch, if I know anything about the signs of the times. The light is too bad for fancy shooting, and I don't want to kill either of 'em. It would look like rank murder."

He shook his head as if in doubt, then turned and a moment later dropped like a flash, hugging closely to one of the side walls of the *barranca* with his revolvers thrust forward. He had heard a stealthy step, as light as the falling of a leaf, yet evidently drawing near.

He was listening for that when there was a crash behind him.

The padre, knife in hand, had flung himself suddenly at his captor, who, as instantly pulled trigger.

Then the light footsteps that Kenyon was watching changed into a tearing rush while a wild cry arose which was echoed from away down the canyon. It was plain, now, that the Indians had seen some one, probably Kenyon, enter at the head of the *barranca*, and had waited until a force could drop into it at a point

lower down, and thought they were sure of their prey.

The shot fired at Rocodo was Kenyon's salvation. He might have fought his way out with all his marvelous skill, courage and luck; but that saved him the desperate risk. At the report the reds rose up with a yell, and charged recklessly down the gulch toward the spot from whence the sound had come, dashing past the form that lay closely enough to the rocks to be taken as part of them.

When the last had passed beyond the turn, whence a snarling cry arose, mingled with the rattle of a revolver, Kenyon dashed recklessly back to regain the plain.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOLDING A RANCH.

THE appearance of the Americans was a disagreeable surprise; but the Don was not so completely taken aback that he did not drop his hand to his belt before the first word of Burton's little speech had been fairly uttered.

It remained there, however; for with Partridge's revolver covering him he was scarcely wild enough to attempt resistance.

He glared around in a vain effort to find some way of escape, and seeing none turned toward the two.

"Assassin!" he exclaimed. "What would you do here? Begone! You cannot expect to carry out your vile plans when once they are known, and though for the moment I may seem to be in thy hands yet a single cry would bring the force here that would crush thee and a dozen more. Only for thy one good deed thou woudst not be spared. Take warning and leave the way thou camest before I utter that cry. After that thou art lost."

"There seems to be a slight misunderstanding," said Burton, stepping forward; and at the movement the Don placed himself in front of Mercedes.

"We are certainly not here as assassins; and if killing can be avoided you can be sure we will be most happy to know it. But we are here; and as the Don was so kind as to offer his body as a stepping stone we accepted the offer in the same kindly spirit in which it was made. Sooner than see harm come to one of the gentler sex we would cheerfully assist at the obsequies of a dozen Dons. I need hardly remark that we have come to stay, and if the prospect is not charming the Don can take a view of it from out doors. Or, if he means mischief, perhaps it would be better to go silently to work. There is no particular sense in having the ranch entirely depopulated, and the fewer that take part in the threatened riot the fewer will be required in the detail for the resultant burial. Is it to be peace or war? Speak quickly, and just as you mean it."

Burton's voice never got above his ordinary conversational tone, and it was a little hard to believe that he meant every word he said.

The Don knew, though, and was silent. If he intended to impress Mercedes by his words he had failed, as he could see by the coolness with which she brushed him aside and stood face to face with Mr. Burton.

"Don't you think the time is a little out of joint for such nonsense? Our friend here is somewhat given to heroics, but he don't mean the half of what he says, and if he did he would hardly be mad enough to carry out his programme in defiance of my commands. Put up your weapons and rest easy. If Estvan is wild enough to make trouble I will bid him good-day, put myself under your protection, and go back to the Seven Saints in spite of all the Apaches that ever drew breath."

"Spoken like a woman of sense," put in Partridge. "The Don's life ought to be forfeited, but we'll give him another trial; and, meantime, it would be as well if we ran things at this ranch. If we are not mistaken there will be hot work here soon, and there might be some little misunderstanding on the part of the defenders. Of course the Don wouldn't surrender himself; but he might make a bargain that would make it particularly uncomfortable for the rest. You sabre, my friend?"

"I do not understand, except that it is all—"

"Go slightly slow. I wouldn't complete that statement if I were you. We do get angry occasionally, and then something happens. You will find that we always get down to the bed-rock of truth if it is at all practicable. If you don't believe it you can get the opinion of Sodder Si and old Ike Dobbs."

"What is that you are saying?" asked Mercedes, sharply, apparently struck by the mention of the names. "What has Ramon to do with those two?"

"Not as much, perhaps, as he would like to have. He certainly did his level best to kill them both."

"Why listen to them longer?" broke in Ramon. "Hark! Without are the wolves, and within are the tigers. We must make terms with the one or the other, or we are lost. Which shall it be?"

"You are out there, my friend. The time for making terms is past. We are running things now, and you must be content with a back seat, if you get any seat at all. Jim, you investigate the cause of the racket, and I will wait upon our friend."

Partridge had been glancing out of the window through which they had entered; but on that side of the building all was silent. The turmoil now seemed to be on the other. Without hesitation he glided away.

Mercedes had almost declared on their side, and as long as she acquiesced neither of the sports seemed to think there would be much trouble about holding their prisoner.

Of course Partridge knew but little in regard to the interior of the ranch, and it was perhaps fortunate that when he had fairly left the room he met one of the Don's men, hurrying to call Estvan. He gave a start of surprise on seeing Partridge, and then would have hastened on had he not been stopped.

"What is it?" carelessly asked the American.

"The Apaches, a thousand curses on their heads! They are on us in force. Must we fight? I held our men in according to orders, until now it is almost too late. They demand a parley, and I am looking for the Don to go out and meet Four Claw."

"You needn't look any further. He is busy, very busy; and wouldn't thank you were you to intrude. I'll attend to the matter for him. Come. What are you doing here? You are no Mexican."

"Throat-cutting is a little safer here than most places elsewhere. I recognized an old-time friend in Estvan, and came here to help him in his diversions. I wouldn't advise you to have much to say to me unless there is a heavy prospect for a fight. I'm rather below par except when they need a man that shoots plumb-center."

"You're the very man I want to see. Who are you?"

"Georgey Haven, as I used to was; and, at present, the man from 'Frisco. I'm about sick of things and the way they run, and if you'll give me a point to tie to I'll catch on till I can see something better."

"I'll be with you to-night and see how things work. If it goes as well as I hope I can tell you sure about the regular thing. For a moment wait here. I will be back to carry our end. Let no one past till I return."

He darted back to the room he had lately left; and almost instantly some one appeared.

At first glance Haven thought it was the Don himself, and an exclamation of surprise was at his tongue's end, but it changed to a short laugh. It was Partridge, who had coolly appropriated enough of the Don's raiment to be easily mistaken for him in a dim light and at a hasty glance.

"Come on now," said Partridge, seeing that he was recognized. "I'll find out what's in the wind or lose a limb; don't you forget it."

Without hesitation Partridge started out, followed closely by the American who hailed from 'Frisco.

The Apaches were still at a respectable distance from the buildings, and were faced by a small body of mounted men who did not seem in the least alarmed. It was evident that a parley of some kind was on the tapis.

Fortunately, the horses of both Estvan and Haven were convenient, and without loss of time the two Americans were in the saddle and dashing out over the plain, just as a brace of warriors came out to meet them.

"Hello!" exclaimed Partridge. "They're coming in peace, and I wouldn't wonder if we got at the real inwardness of things now. Keep the rest of the gang back; and I'll play Don a leetle, and see what I can make out of them."

It was a risky piece of business, for in the darkness, it would not have been hard to have arranged an ambuscade, and Partridge had had no opportunity to see what was going on; while he knew well enough that both white and red were his foes. Any treachery would be hard to guard against, and his identity once known he could expect nothing but war from all sides.

Yet Partridge and his sole attendant rode boldly out, passing a few rods to the side of a little knot of the Don's men, whom they waved back, as they made a movement as if to follow. Straight toward the Apaches they went, only halting when they were so near that conversation could be carried on in a comparatively low tone.

Then Partridge held up his hand, the palm outward and instantly both parties came to a halt.

Four Claw broke the silence first.

"Shall the chief speak before his brother?"

"Let my brother speak," answered Partridge, his voice almost an exact imitation of the Don's. "But speak quickly. There are those behind that I would not leave long alone. They are my foes."

"And the foes of Four Claw, who must have their scalps. The stranger who was with the Donna beyond the motte shed much blood. He must not escape."

"He is my foe more than thine, and I would that he was in thy hands to work thy will with; since mine are tied."

"It is the demand that Four Claw would make. He is the friend of Don Ramon, but he cannot forget his red brothers that bit the plain behind the motte. They must be avenged

if the ranch and all within it are taken in the same net."

Partridge was surprised at the language of the Apache, for not often do the men of that tribe acquire such command over a strange tongue; but he heard the savage threat with perfect composure. He had expected nothing else, and was already decided how to take advantage of it.

"The chief speaks well. He shall have him—now if it can be—but we must have a care. The eyes of the senora have been blinded, and she would even fight for him. She must not know. He would beg like a whipped hound and she would be all for mercy. Yet if I can deliver him into thy hands it would be best for thee to withdraw quietly, until I can send thee word that thou art needed."

Partridge had his own ideas and was willing to risk something on them. If he had been wrong it would have gone far toward betraying him, but as "the event" proved he had hit on the truth, and so only strengthened his disguise.

"As my brother would have it; so that the American is given to us. If not, the braves will take their own way of revenge, and all will suffer."

"As thou hast said, so it shall be. In an hour or less I will see thee again, and if things do not go greatly wrong, I will have the American in my hand. He suspects nothing, and it will not be hard to lead him away from where the safety for him lies. Then my men can make short work, and thou canst do thy will. Have patience. Thou shall see me soon again."

"An hour will we wait. If thou hast not done thy duty then, beware. We will do our own work, in our own way."

As he finished his threat the Apache turned away, while Partridge, with Haven at his shoulder, galloped back to the house, without interviewing the squad that had been curiously watching him from afar.

"You see your way clear, I suppose?" muttered Haven, in an undertone, and with a suspicious laugh.

"I should hope so. I'll try to believe that the Don will be able to as well. Ahem! If I thought he couldn't, really, I should be quite miserable."

It was a desperate joke that had come into the mind of Mr. Partridge; but he was not likely to delay carrying it out on that account.

CHAPTER XXII.

BURTON'S LITTLE SCHEME.

DONNA MERCEDES took the strange state of affairs with a coolness that was refreshing. Burton mentally decided that he could not have shown more unconcern himself, and could hardly understand it. The Donna had scarcely shown that she was willing to throw her old friend over for the comparative strangers, yet she must have known that that would be the result.

When Partridge rushed back to obtain some of the Don's clothing to serve as a disguise, she frowned a little, and then said, with the sweetest of smiles, that under the circumstances she thought it would be well if the Americans were allowed to frame the plan of defense which would soon be needed, and that it was so foolish for the Don to urge his objections that really she would say nothing more on either side.

After that Ramon shut his teeth and said nothing. He eyed his captors with a savage glare, and waited for what was to come next.

"I'm sorry that for your protection as well as our own, we have been compelled to adopt rather strenuous measures," began Burton by way of apology. "If Ramon would listen to reason we might all pull together. As it is, we must take hold as the timber comes or we will all go up the flume together. The confidence you have shown in us is a great compliment, and you may rest assured that we will not fail to merit it. We are only two, and the Don has his retainers by the score, but your safety is with us."

"You may be mistaken, yet I have felt that I must trust you. Whatever comes I feel sure that you mean no harm to me—and the Don is one of my friends. You will protect him in spite of himself. Allow me to retire now. The crisis has not come yet, and I would gather strength for it when it does."

"Certainly," replied Burton, with his courtliest bow.

"It is only our purpose to remain here while your safety requires it; and we have no fears that you will harm us. Perhaps when Jim comes back, we can open the Don's eyes to the danger that he won't allow himself to suspect."

This was all very cool; but if the Don was not aware that there was an overwhelming force at his very doors, he was a good deal blinder than he was usually credited with being. Mercedes smiled, waved her dainty fingers, and floated out of the room. Evidently she had her own opinions.

Burton had his.

"Sorry for you, old man," he whispered. "I give you credit for having set up half the mischief that is afoot, and I hate to see a real nervy man disappointed. My pard and me—well, we object to being played for fools, and that's the

reason we have chipped in. The Donna smells a mouse, moreover; and you can bet your bottom dollar she will keep quiet till she sees what it all means. She has more sense than any woman I ever saw—whether that's saying much or little I'm not revealing. Just take it easy until the council has another meeting. Then we'll decide what is to be done with you, and we'll put you out of your misery."

Still the Don remained mute. He had made up his mind to silence, and silence he maintained, though astonishment began to mingle with his anger. Could these cool strangers think that, for any length of time, they could hold him prisoner in his own ranch, with a score of armed men near enough to be brought by his call?

It was time that the greater part of his adherents were holding the Apaches at bay; but there was a chance that any moment the situation would be discovered.

While he was trying to decide in his own mind whether such a discovery would or would not prove instantly fatal, and while Burton was idly watching him—though with forefinger on the trigger of his revolver—Partridge came gliding back.

"Still in business, Buttons? Glad to see you looking so healthy, and hope your nerves are in good order. The Don and old Four have just been setting up a most abominable game on you. Your little labors back at the *mote* have been duly appreciated, and they are anxious for you to be present at a grand pyrotechnic display to be given in your honor."

"There, there, that will do. I understand. It would be unhealthy to be taken alive, and it wouldn't be half fun for them if they got me in any other shape. They propose a bonfire. Good enough. I propose not to assist in the fumigation."

"But I propose that you shall. I'm going to see what is the bottom card in the hand of our friend the Don, and I don't know any better way to get at it. Shuck yourself of your upper paraphernalia, and we'll see how the Don looks in the clothes of a gentleman."

Burton smiled audibly.

"I catch on. If they turn him loose it uncovers his game. But suppose they don't—"

"I can't say who is the heir-at-law of our worthy friend; though I have hopes that his last will and testament may be found to be in favor of the Salvador. Now, don't waste time, I suppose it would be safest to gag him."

For an instant it seemed as though the obstinacy of the Don was about to give way. His mouth opened—then closed again. The muzzle of Burton's revolver was a hint that a deaf man could take, and by the time he had thought twice it was too late.

The men handled him as though he was an infant, and did their work with easy thoroughness. In five minutes had he looked in the glass he would not have known himself whether he was William Burton or a very much worse man. When he was handed out of the window and received into the arms of the man from 'Frisco he began to understand the plan.

Fortunate it was that such dispatch had been used; scarcely had they vacated the room when the Donna re-entered it. She had seen the scores and scores of dusky forms on the plain, and began at last to feel as thorough an anxiety as she was capable of.

To her surprise she found the apartment vacant; and from the window caught a glimpse of four figures, stealing away in the darkness.

"They are all gone together. What can the meaning of that be? Are the strangers treacherous, and have I been doing Ramon injustice in the dark doubts I have had of him? Who can say whether it be best to wait and see, or to give an alarm at once. It is not too late. They are still between the line of the *vagueiros* and the ranch. Yet, false or true, the men have a wonderful courage of their own. I will wait and see the end of it."

As her eyes became better accustomed to the gloom upon the plain she could more clearly distinguish the moving figures, and she watched them with intense eagerness, giving a start of something like alarm when she saw several horsemen ride out from the Indian line, and meet the two that kept boldly on.

"Treachery somewhere," she muttered. "They have left a prisoner behind. Can it be that they have given the Don over to the hands of the savage wretches? If so they shall be paid for the foul deed, if it has to be by my own hands. Ah, they are coming back, and they move slowly, like men that have no fear. The traitors!"

And yet, with a woman's inconsistency, she did not altogether believe in her own words. To do that would be to admit that she had been terribly mistaken. What woman would wish to do that?

And meantime the three men came ambling gayly back.

"Swallowed him like a little man," laughed Burton. "No words over it but took him right in. We ought to get out of range before they make any discoveries. They may just go wild over it when they find out the nature of the seal."

"Don't crowd the procession. If we take it easy they won't suspect until they have lost us for good. I don't care to go whooping in just ahead of them. You might be all right, but some of the herdsmen might not know exactly which way to shoot. I think they have some latitude in their orders."

The harsh laugh of Haven broke in.

"It's my own blessed opinion that they won't find out their mistake at all. You've got the Don pretty well gagged, and something will be apt to happen to him before he has a chance to rise and explain. I'm afraid the good Don is elected for kingdom come."

"It looks that way," said Partridge, more thoughtfully than usual. "And if they try it on I suppose that we will have to see him out some way or other. Our brilliant scheme don't work any too well. We won't know any more than we did before."

That seemed to be about the fact in the case. Hardly had Partridge left Four Claw at the first meeting, when the chief issued a few rapid orders; and now he was ready for an evening's amusement. Never expecting any interference he was about to begin. The braves came trooping up, at a low signal that went along the line.

"Confound it, Jim, I can't stand it," said Burton, sliding off his horse. "Get in a little closer to head-quarters and hold my mustang ready. I'll try a bit of a still-hunt. I want to know what they are after. If you hear me at work you can know something has happened, and chip or fall back, just as it seems advisable."

"All right, if you will be a fool; but I think we'd better go back and hold the ranch. There's only two of us, and we won't have much of a show against a hundred, if we take the field. If Kenyon was here now!"

"Oh, well, we'll take the two-thirds of it, and leave the balance for him when he arrives. So long."

Crouching low, he glided away, while for some little distance the two pursued their course toward the ranch. When they got where they were hidden by the dark background of the buildings they halted, and, facing about, watched earnestly for the developments they expected.

They did not have long to wait. There was a gradually growing flare of light and then quick flashes and a rattle of rapid reports. Without waiting to consult over what might be the matter, the two clapped spurs to their mustangs and dashed straight toward the *melee*, riding in silence, and unconscious of the wild swish of hoofs behind them.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HOW THE SCHEME FELL THROUGH.

To cover his interview with the supposed Don, Four Claw, like the good general that he was, had pressed the line somewhat heavily at a distant point, and had succeeded in diverting attention. Donna Mercedes herself would not have half understood what might be going on had it not been for that first chance glance through the window that riveted her attention.

When once her suspicions were aroused, she did not wait very long before acting. Without explaining what it was that she intended, she gathered up half a dozen men and led them off in a mad race, which was all the madder from the moment that Burton's pistols began to crack. She saw that others of the Don's adherents were converging toward the spot, and hoped, wildly desperate as the effort seemed, to hit the Apaches hard, if nothing else was effected.

She had a dozen men behind her when she saw, just in front, two horsemen and a led mustang, racing madly in the same direction.

Those with her thought they recognized the Don; but Mercedes knew better. Unless the uncertain light was a great deal more deceiving than she believed the man was Partridge. Who the other was she did not know. Haven was a perfect stranger.

At any rate they were bound on the same errand; and the Mexicans that might have failed her, followed him with cheerful recklessness.

It was a desperate ride they were taking; and no one questioned the fact. There was no noise, and the cheers that generally go with a charge were all left for the return flight.

Yet before they were within the pistol-shot distance at which they would open fire, there was a change in the aspect of the swaying mass before them. It appeared to be cleft open by rapid strokes of fire, and three horsemen, lying low in their saddles, and shooting right and left, drove out of the ruck.

When Burton had made his way up to the very outskirts of the Apache group, and halted because he could go no nearer without making his presence known, he felt a hand laid lightly on his arm, and heard a warning "Sh!" at his ear.

A foe would have given no such caution: yet it was much more surprising to meet a friend there. He could hardly believe it, and thrust backward his left hand, with a pistol in it, ready to shoot if he discovered treachery.

Then he heard the voice, husky and familiar:

"Me too, pard. When that's fun, count on ole Si ez bein' round. Our fr'end that's in a purty tight place, but we kin rise an' shoot. I've bin takin' in ther lay ov things; an' I kin see 'bout how ter run it. That's a gang ov hoss flesh, an' on'y one young buck a-watchin' ov 'em. We kin clean 'em up, git a mount apiece, an' pick up yer pard afore they know what's hit 'em. Arter that it's all blind luck. Ef they hit us they git us an' ef they don't they won't. Are you ready fur ther break?"

"It's about the only chance. If we don't it looks as though he was elected."

"You bet he's elected. They ain't goin' fur any foolishness over him. They jest mean business every time."

"Then—I got him into this scrape, and I'll see him out. But I don't see what call you have to mix in the business; and I don't understand how you got here, anyhow."

"Oh, I'm stayin' by yer every time. Ther man ez does Sodder Si a good turn ain't got long ter wait fur him ter git even. Methunk that war some skull-duggery on ther carpet; an' I jest slid down ter put er finger in it. Will I lead an' you foller? er shell you foller an' I lead? I'm a whoosher ter lead, an' a boss on wheels ter plan; an' yer couldn't git a better man ter tie to."

"Lead then; and be quick about it. We've not many minutes to decide in."

Burton had satisfied his doubts, even at some risk; and having found a man as reckless as himself was ready for risk and work.

And it was high time; for it looked very much as though the fate of the prisoner had been so positively settled beforehand that there was no intention to allow him to speak for himself until the pleasant exercises connected with his taking off were actually begun.

The plan of Sodder Si, reckless as it was, was about the only one that offered any show of success; and it had to be attempted immediately; for every moment the throng before them grew denser and more excited, while the chances of discovery increased in the same proportion.

Toward the ponies the two crept; and, as it happened, just then there was a little stir of excitement beyond, that drew attention in that direction. They moved stealthily enough, but still, it was a piece of good luck that they were not observed until they rose up in the midst of the herd, and flung themselves on the two animals that happened to come handiest.

Then the mass of the snorting mustangs broke away, while the two mounted men, followed by a couple of the freed animals, flashed down upon the group that surrounded the prisoner.

Even while he went Burton could not help but cast an admiring glance toward his ally.

"You may be a vagabond, and you may be a cut-throat," he muttered; "but I'll swear to one thing: you're the boss hoss-stealer—the nerviest one of 'em that ever wore unmentionables. I'll follow you—if it takes me into kingdom come."

Yet, while he jested the two were darting down upon the Apaches like thunderbolts, and the Indians, not having heard the sound of a voice, or caught a glimpse of a strange figure, were as much at a loss to understand the cause of the stampede as was the bewildered guard, who was calling loudly for assistance. It was only when the hands of half a dozen braves clutched at the heads of the leading mustangs, that the true meaning was revealed.

Hanging Indian fashion along their horses, two men shot away through to the side of the prisoner who, bound and gagged, lay stretched upon the ground in the midst of the circle.

For a moment there was confusion, worse confounded. The quarters were too close, the throng too deeply penetrated for the Apaches to use firearms or arrows, and they crushed forward, hoping to overwhelm the assailants by sheer force of weight.

They found a pair of fighters as good as themselves, and twice as reckless. Sodder Si, bending low, gathered up the figure of the captive and whirled him up in front of him, and with a quick sweep of the knife he had been holding between his teeth, cut away the thongs from Ramon's wrists.

"That's a shooter in me boot; yer hed better feel fur it an' do yer best to make things lively fur ther boys. We're in 'bout the tightest pinch a white man ever see'd, an' ef we don't make corpses we'll hev a durned good chance to look at our own."

"Carajo!" exclaimed the Don, as the gag dropped from his mouth. "If I have not vengeance on all may the fires of perdition seize me! Let me but get away from this and the extermination shall begin! Not a soul that had a hand in this!"

He ceased speaking and began to shoot. He had found the revolver in Sodder Si's boot.

Sodder Si was more than astonished. He recognized the voice on the instant, and made a movement that looked as though he would cast the Don back among the red-skins from whom he had just snatched him.

He had his foe on the hip, and had but to abandon him to his fate to have full revenge for the scene in the little dingle.

A strange scowl flashed over the battered face, an instant later, however, and with one heave of the arm that possessed such prodigious strength, he flung him from him; but upon the back of a mustang that had followed close by his side.

Then the two dashed on, shooting as they went, and bursting out of the jam at a point where Partridge was just about to open fire, and the Donna and her followers, a little further off, had aimed to strike.

But as they came a cloud of reds, fifty at least, were swinging in from the rear of the Donna, and with wild yells charging straight for the melee. Caught between the upper and nether millstones, it looked as though the triumph of Four Claw was a matter of a few brief moments. And the wily savage, thinking that in Partridge he recognized the Don, acted with a prompt strategy, that seemed to insure success.

While the main force of the Apaches was crushing down upon the whites, with a score of his best warriors he swung around the swaying mass and headed directly for the ranch. If he took that it seemed certain that, without any place of refuge open for them, the fate of Mercedes and her friends was assured.

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN THE GLARE OF THE FIRE.

THE Don was, perhaps, the best horseman on the plain, finished equestrians as they all were. In the saddle he was a perfect demon when in battle, and he never was more desperate than now. As he touched the mustang's back he seemed to become a part of the animal. He bent over and snatched a lance from the hand of a brave, whom he pistoled as he reached, and then, saving the few remaining loads in his revolver for an emergency, he used the weapon with a skill that showed that it was not strange to his hands. In his rage he was willing to strike with perfect impartiality wherever he saw a mark, and it was only the chance that the reds were in the way and the others were not, that saved even the man who had just rescued him from his savage thrusts.

He seemed to bear a charmed life. In spite of shots and strokes he received no wound, and, swerving to this side and to that, he kept on.

When Partridge and the man from 'Frisco opened fire it gave a slight check to the pursuit that would otherwise have pushed the fugitives close. The braves in the front rank drew up a moment to see what was the meaning of the fresh attack, and so the Apaches from the rear came down upon the Donna and those with her, while their eyes were all for those before them.

It was all very plain sailing. A volley of bullets and arrows, and down went more than half of the Mexicans. It was only chance that saved Mercedes, for the first intimation of the rear attack that she had was seeing her followers drop at her side and hearing the deadly missiles whistling around her.

At that she was staggered. She drew in her mustang and hesitated. In another moment she would have been in the hands of the redskins.

"This-a-ways, purty," said a voice in her ear, and Sodder Si, leaning over, caught her bridle. "They's comin', thick as Smiths in purgatory. That's only one chance. We can't git back to ther ranch; we've got ter git some other way, an' hyar she be."

With a sudden tug he guided the animals to the left, and tried to dart through the little lane that appeared through the ranks of foes that faced from either side.

It was a short, sharp hazard, and after that a better chance of escape. Once clear of the Indians, and if their steeds were the better, and no disabling wounds were received for a few minutes, they might have the danger all behind them. Then the prairie was open and they would have some show in a race for life.

When Sodder Si wheeled, the others were not slow to take in the condition of affairs. The way to the ranch was thoroughly well blocked, and only the one slight show of an opening in any other direction. They followed in a desperate break, shooting as they went. Two or three dropped out of the race, but the Donna, and those with whom our story has more particularly to do, were still protected by the wonderful good fortune that had been with them all along; and they shot out from the line of the Apaches, that at the last moment had joined, only to be riven asunder as the game swept through.

Of the Indians, a dozen, perhaps, got away in instant pursuit. The balance were a shade later; but that half-minute of time made all the difference to the fugitives. Turning in their saddles they fired with perfect aim, even while they pressed their steeds to the utmost. What was an attack became a chase; and not a very close one either. The deadly nature of the fire showed that the game was dangerous to approach; and a wild turmoil, that arose in the direction of the ranch, turned attention thitherward.

"Look! By heavens, they have taken the place!" exclaimed Burton, pointing as he spoke. The tramp was again at his side.

Sodder Si nodded.

"Ye'r right. Thar's a ginn'ral clean-up ter night. Ther Don hez played it on 'em onc't too of'en, an' Four Claw means ter go ter get even, sure. Drop off a leetle ter ther side, an' git in with ther crowd. I've got biz in t'other d'rection, an' they wouldn't want me in that crowd; not bad they wouldn't."

There were still a dozen or more of them, riding almost abreast, but separated into a number of distinct squads, Sodder Si himself being on the extreme right flank. He seemed to consider his work done, and as he spoke he began to edge further away.

Burton made no objection.

So far, he had been unable to reach the side of Mercedes, though that was where he most wanted to be. The way seemed open now, and he was very willing to seize the opportunity. A touch to the reins, a slight pressure of his knees, and his mustang commenced obliquing, while Si was lost in the darkness.

And then the young Sport heard a fierce, triumphant exclamation just behind him, while his horse went down under him, more quickly than if shot. "Perditions seize thee!" exclaimed the Don's voice. "I can leave thee here for the red wolves to mangle. I thought my hand had not lost its cunning, and I would that I had felt sure to reach thy back instead of thy horse's back. He is the better brute of the two. I would that I had had a bullet or two to spare for him, as he lay stretched on the ground, or that he had fallen for my mustang to leap upon. Yet Four Claw will pick him up where he lies, and give me my revenge without praying for it. Now, for Mercedes!"

The Don shook his lance, with which he had skillfully hamstrung the poor mustang, and gave a last glance over his shoulder, at the motionless form that was already but indistinctly seen, as it melted away in the darkness.

Burton lay as still as a dead man; and if his neck was broken by the bursting fall, small reason would there be in that to wonder, since he seemed to strike the ground first with his head. Stranger far that the Apaches, a moment later, should sweep by within bullet-tossing distance, and never see him. But then they had their eyes fixed on the throng ahead, that was tearing back for the ranch of the Seven Saints.

"Well, I will be hanged," muttered Burton, a little later, as he rose to his knees and looked warily around. "For pure gratitude command me to the Don; of all reptiles he takes the cake. But the end is not yet; and one day I'll balance accounts with him—if I lose Mercedes. Blame me if I don't think we're *earning* a million or two. Let me see. They are all a mile away, and the 'Pash evidently hold the ranch. If I can't steal a horse I'm an elected darling. Jim will never think of me while the widow is around—and a fellow that can't take care of himself is hardly worth looking after. Here goes to see what fate has in store for me. A bonfire or a gold-mine—it will be all the same a hundred years from now."

As he rose to his feet and staggered away—badly shaken, but with no broken bones—the first little tongue of flame shot up from the roof of Ramon's ranch. The red raiders had made short work of it, either by accident or design; and soon the glare rose brilliantly on the night air.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ALFREDO'S GRIP.

PARTRIDGE looked along the line of his fellow fugitives, and failed to see Burton. His attention had been fixed on the Donna at the precise time that his friend went down, and so he had failed to note the act of the treacherous Don, or even see that the two men had been within lance-thrust distance of each other.

He was prepared for an accident, and was not ready to desert his friends, even for the glory and profit of escorting Mercedes. The moment she was in no present danger he was ready to look for his pard, whose mustang still ran by his side.

Then, when he saw that the Don's house was on fire, he thought of Ike Dobbs, who was somewhere in the building, wounded, and apparently doomed.

"Kind of strikes me that it wouldn't be white to go frolicking off with the fair Mercedes when I've got two pards behind me in trouble. I'll bet some small money that Buttons thought the same way. Dobbs may be crazy as a loon, but I've shaken hands with him, and that ought to mean business. Anyhow, he can't be quite as mad as this wild woman who goes tearing around the country instead of leaving men to fight the thing out in ship-shape. If she had staid at the ranch, the Don's wealth would have remained at a hundred cents on the dollar, and we would have known just what way to turn. If I stay in this, I suppose the Don and I have got to fight. Wonder if my best hold wouldn't be to drop out, anyway? We could trust the Donna to him while they are in danger, and Charley will be ready to receive 'em at the other end of the line. I think I'll let them slide. If I know anything about horseflesh, the Donna would

drop me two feet in five if she let the animal extend itself. Here goes."

What had happened had almost convinced Partridge that Estvan would not run the risk of trusting himself in the hands of the Apaches, and if he did not, the chances were that, under cover of the night the party would try to hark back to the Seven Saints. As their horses had the heels of those of the Apaches who were in pursuit, it did not require very much shrewdness to make such a guess, nor was it difficult to put his scheme in operation.

Before he left he had a word or two to say. Ranging up to the Donna again, who was very earnest over the retreat, he whispered briefly in her ear:

"You can't run forever, and the only place to make a stand is back at the Seven Saints. You will find Kenyon there, looking after your interests as though they were his own. Trust him—and don't trust the Don. Keep him covered; and the first treacherous movement down let him go. If you don't—you won't need any advice by the latter part of next week. So long. We'll all see you later."

Mercedes would have stopped him; but it was too late. He had already galloped away; and she saw that he had taken advantage of a little gully, that covered him momentarily from those in pursuit. On the impulse of the moment she might have followed him, but just then Don Ramon came ranging alongside.

His voice bespoke more calmness than she had expected, though there was a glint of concentrated passion in it that showed he was not quite as resigned as his words would imply.

"It is vain to think to find refuge at my hacienda. The raiders have ruined me, though I think it small loss if thy safety be only secured in the end. How little price is it for the satisfaction of seeing them willing to risk thy precious life to save mine—worthless without thee."

"No great risk have I run; but risk or not Mercedes Salvador never counts the cost to set right the wrong she sees she has done. When first the Americans captured thee I stood by, consenting. It was a bold game to protect their own lives, and I would not interfere, for I thought they meant thee no further harm, whilst thou wouldest have slain them if thou couldst. When I saw they had given thee over into the hands of Four Claw I went to thy rescue as of a man I had wronged. It was a debt I owed; say no more about it. I have forgotten. No doubt they had good reason for what they did. With that I have nothing to do. They have gone their way; I shall go mine; and it will take me back to my own home, from which I was mad to venture. I am sorry that I have brought this ruin on thee though partly was it your own fault. If I escape with anything left to me I shall insist on bearing my share of the loss. For the present, I am glad to see that you do not whine—neither do I. Will you ride with me to the Seven Saints; or do I go alone?"

"With thee, the world over," gallantly replied the Don, ignoring the greater part of the lengthy explanation that Mercedes had seen fit to make. If he had any scheme of his own on foot he was careful to keep it hidden; and he certainly did not boast of what he had just done toward settling accounts with the Americans. It was a long time until morning, and there was plenty of time to work his will, if he could only rearrange his affairs.

And meantime his retainers were scattered, and the glare of his burning buildings was rising higher behind him. If he could give up everything for Mercedes he was certainly very much in earnest.

The pursuit was not abandoned, either. It had slackened a little, until reinforcements came up. Then it was renewed in a style that showed the Apaches were not at all doubtful of the result. Even the Donna noticed this; and was troubled by it.

"They follow too leisurely to please me," she said, at length.

"There must be an ambuscade ahead, which they are waiting for us to fall into. Yet, why should it have been prepared? They could not have suspected that we would be taking this course to-night; since chance alone has forced us into it. An hour ago we would not have dreamed of it ourselves. They should come faster or drop out completely."

"I like it not, myself," responded the Don. "Better for us that we turn aside. Then, if we find the way open we can reach the ranch from an unexpected direction; if not we can hide or flee as may seem best, when daylight comes. I like not this working in the dark."

"Caution and I shook hands and parted some years ago; yet—it is as thou hast said. Nothing can be lost by care. Veer off to the right, and we will see what our friends in the rear will do. A good thing is it that it is moonlight. We can watch them from a distance, and yet have all the advantage of night's shadows."

Ramon had flung aside the hat and coat that had so effectually disguised him; and now could scarcely pass for any other than himself. Bare-headed he rode, and the short jacket he wore was part of his ordinary costume when in the

saddle. If Four Claw could see him he could; scarcely mistake him for one of the Americans and he had no doubt but that by this time, Partridge had cast away his cloak, so that there was an opening for a new deal all around.

Mad as Ramon had been for revenge, he was not altogether sure that he would take it on the Apaches just now, even if the chance was offered to him. His busy brain was evolving a scheme to win success out of the most desperate failure. He could understand how Four Claw had been doubly tricked; and making an allowance for the seeming treachery, did not wonder that the chief had struck his dwelling in sudden wrath.

For that he might settle in the future; but for the present he was sure, if he could but come face to face with Four Claw.

As he turned that idea over in his mind, something tapped him lightly on the arm, then a noose tightened around him, and he was flung violently from his saddle, while the Donna gave a little cry of alarm and raised the revolver she carried in her hand, looking swiftly and sharply around her for the foe she knew was near.

"It is of no use, Mercedes," said a voice that did not sound altogether unfamiliar.

"If thou wouldest save thine own life as well as Estvan's, to say nothing of the other blind fools that ride with thee, hold up thy hands. Thou art surrounded by a score of sure shooters, and it is death or surrender. Yet be assured that you fall into the hands of a friend. Alfredo Destajo would die before harm should come to thee; but it is only as his prisoner that he can help thee."

"Ah," said Mercedes, "I yield. Be as good as thy word or it may be the worse for thee. Come forward, if thou art not ashamed to be seen, and explain what may be the meaning of this. Scarce can I believe thee a renegade; yet it looks much like it. I had once reason to believe in thee, however; and with thy promise of safety for me and Don Ramon, I shall cease to struggle now against fate."

"That promise thou hast, as long as there is no occasion given by thee to break it. See. To struggle would be certain death. No one would have thought of this chance, but we are ready to take it. Be not afraid. We are strong for slaughter, but hope for no reason why we should make it."

Then, around them, the Apaches rose up, and at the head of them Destajo, who stepped gracefully to the side of Mercedes.

CHAPTER XXXI.

PARDS TO TIE TO.

IKE DOBBS had not been living on the border and down among the Mexicans and their Indian neighbors so many years for nothing. He was just about as wise as the wisest, and under other circumstances would scarcely have fallen into the ambuscade that in so many ways had proved disastrous. When the bullet hit him he went down and knew very little more until he found himself lying in a little out-house to the rear of the main buildings.

He rather thought at first that he was dying. There was a singularly heavy feeling in his head and a sharp pain in his side underneath the clotted bandage that had been tightly drawn around him.

Fortunately for him, when he was brought in Don was in the best of humors, for it seemed to him that Mercedes was going to smile on him. It angered him somewhat that the shots had missed the men he would gladly have seen out of the way, and who had escaped altogether, while Dobbs, who was a favorite *attache* of the Donna, and who was in no one's way, had been hit. It might even make trouble for him when everything else was going right.

For such reasons, and because when his own interests were not specially in the way he was not the worst man in the world, the Don paid some attention to the wounded Isaac. He had him plastered up after the best possible temporary fashion, and left one of his men with him to attend to his wants. If he had paid closer attention himself his mind might have been still further relieved; but anyway he had hopes that the patient would be better by morning. If he was worse it might be possible to smother the thing up without a too close investigation into the causes that had been at work. He hardly anticipated the wild work that was to come.

Dobbs announced his return to full consciousness by a dismal groan that startled his attendant. Then he moved feebly, and asked what had happened.

"The Apaches, senor," answered the youth, who, knowing nothing about the matter, offered the most plausible explanation that came into his mind. As Isaac knew nothing to the contrary he offered no objections.

"That's 'bout ther heft ov it. Kerrelle me, an' throwed ther sports cold. But—say. How did I git *hyar*? Las' thing I know we war a gallopin' along, 'way out yander. Sorter 'pears I couldn't a-walked *hyar*."

"No, senor. An hour ago the good Don brought thee with his own hands. A fight there was, and I know not how many slain. Thou wast wounded hard, but he saw there was life left, and he saved thee at every risk."

"Kinder took a gen'rous streak, all ter sud-

den. Didn't think thar war that much in him. Ye'r' sure it wa'n't one ov ther 'Merican sharks ez did ther totin'. I'd look fur them ter stay by till ther last horn blowed, but fur ther Don ter think ov crazy Ike kinder gits me. Get me a drink, I'm dry ez a fish."

Dobbs's voice was stronger, and he could begin to think. For the first part, he had doubts of the Don's philanthropy; for the second, he felt very sharply his own physical needs.

The youth held a pitcher of water to his lips.

"Drink," he said, "and talk not. Sleep if thou canst. To-morrow thy head will be clear, and all will be told to thee."

"Consolin', that, if a feller ain't actooally elected ter pass over ther range about daybreak. I'm a-hankerin' ter hear ther hull truth now—but I guess I've drawed about all *you* know. Say, water's good fur infants, but couldn't yer git me a mouthful ov red hot aguardiente ter-sot a sick man on his pins? Jest look 'round, an' ef yer can't find a vial go to ther Donna an' tell her Honest Ike must hev it er die. Thar's an awful droppingness 'round me vittals, and ef I on't let go me hold, I'm gone."

"But, senor, thy wounds! To thee it would be poison. The water's best for thee. I will get it fresh."

"Did yer hear me, er didn't yer? Ef yer didn't, I'll say it onc't more, an' say it slow. Ef yer did—git!"

His belt of arms lay beside him, just where it had been taken off to dress his wounds. He caught up a revolver as he spoke, and emphasized his request by sharply clicking the hammer.

The name of Crazy Ike had been caught by the Mexican, and the force of its meaning had not been lost. He bounded for the door without the shadow of a delay.

"Si, senor; I run. In a breath I will return. Have mercy."

Without waiting for an answer to his prayer, he bounded out, leaving Dobbs to his own devices.

Ike watched him go with a sickly grin.

"Ef he brings me ther brandy, it'll brace me all up, an' ef he don't, it'll be almost ez good. Durned ef I want a Greaser 'round when I'm lookin' at ther bucket, I'd sooner kick it alone."

"But mebbe it ain't ez bad ez it looks. Let's take 'count ov stock. I can't pass in ther checks jest when the game comes my way. Bet yer life, Isaac 'll be 'round yit."

He straightened himself up, felt his head and side, and was better satisfied than ever.

"I might er knowed it. A loud call; but no election. Head scraped an' side bit hard, but no vittals reached. I may take a hand yit in the frolic—an' that condemned young gerloot seems ter hev raised the dickens outside. Snakes hev waked, an' no mistake."

He was on his feet now, wavering with weakness, yet striving to stand still while he listened.

There were shots, yells, the swift rush of hoofs, and then the war-cry of the Apaches that rose high above the din, and frightfully close. Without seeing anything of what was going on Dobbs knew in an instant after that the reds had come again, and this time with the winning hand. Weak as he was he waited no longer. First he dashed out the faint light that was burning in the cabin, and then staggered out into the darkness, throwing himself upon the ground.

He felt faint and powerless; yet behind it all was any amount of pure grit. If he had seen the chance he would have struck it to the aid of Mercedes without a moment's hesitation. When he saw that toward the house nothing could be done he was ready to look after his own safety.

Fortunately the attention of the Apaches was pretty thoroughly divided between the main building, and a knot of the Don's followers who were mounted, and in full retreat. They had eyes for little else just then. By and by they would be exploring the shadows for any stragglers that might be lurking there.

Dobbs saw the charge that swept up to the very doors of the building; saw, too, something that puzzled him a little, for Four Claw, who had hastily decided on the attack, tried in vain to prevent the destruction that he had not intended.

"Cuss 'em, they're reg'lar wolves ov ther plains. They hain't no use fur a buildin'. They'd sooner burn it down than stick ther noses in ter see who's thar. Isaac, yer hed better be amblin'. When ther fire gits fairly goin' thar won't be much chance ter git outen range o' them sharp opticks. It's thunder and blazes ter move; but better that than a dead cock in ther pit. They kin cut him to ther rattles, but Ike Dobbs don't gi'n up."

The excitement of the moment had brought back his strength in a great measure, but he knew that there was danger of its failing him at any moment, and that something must be done while it lasted. As for doing anything for any one who might be left in the building—that was out of the question.

Chance still favored him. From the rear of the little out-house he crept away, and even when the blaze began to flare up the long shadow concealed him.

Three Handsome Sports.

The lay of the land was all strange to him. He had been at the ranch before, but the night and his condition confused him so that he scarcely knew where he was, or which way to turn.

Still, it seemed to him that unless the shadows were more than deceiving he could reach cover in a few hundred yards. It appeared to him that he remembered the head of a little gully somewhere thereabouts, and thought that he distinguished the slight swell in the land that marked its course.

In that direction he painfully crawled, now and then casting anxious glances to the rear to see if he had yet been discovered.

The further he went the more certain he became that he had not been mistaken. His progress had been slow, since he was both weak and careful, yet when he had but a score of yards further to go to reach what he was now satisfied would be comparative safety, could he but gain it unobserved, he saw a compact little group, of perhaps half a score of warriors, swing away from the throng, and ride off at a hard run.

They gave no evidence of having seen him, and their course would take them far to his left, yet Dobbs instinctively knew that he was discovered.

He never quickened his pace. It might be that he was mistaken, and a false move would only work his ruin, while in any case, he could not get much further than the entrance to the gulch. There, the little start that he could gain would make but slender difference, and one place would be about as good for a stand as another.

He crept behind the little roll in the ground without even a glance to the rear. His heart hardly throbbed quicker, since it had been thumping at about as fast a rate as it could well assume; but he set his teeth hard and glared around him, without any real hope of being able to find any way of escape.

The place offered little facility for defense or concealment, once it was known that he was there. He might hope to kill a couple, and then it would all be over. With his revolvers cocked and ready he lay down against the gentle slope, waiting for the attack that he knew must come, and without any hope of aid. He had seen that the few Mexicans that had rallied around the ranch had been remorselessly butchered, while those that had made good their escape went in such dead earnest that there was small chance of their wanting to stop within the next dozen miles.

The movement of the Apaches to the left, had simply been as a blind. Either thinking that it had been observed, or that it would be of no use, they turned and swept on directly for the spot where Ike lay.

"Ther sooner I begins ter shoot ther more loads I kin git out; an' I want ther papers ter hev ther chanc't ter say, every barr'l war empty, an' thar war marks ov despit conflict. That's 'bout ther way they gin'rally puts it; an' this time they won't be so fur wrong. How fur I kin reach 'em are a p'int ez 'pends on fair luck, an' good ca'tridges. It won't be long afore I kin try."

It was still long range for pistol practice, but Ike raised his hand, taking steady aim at the leading braves, his finger on the trigger. He was just about to fire when the man went down.

Off on the flank of the Apaches a single man had appeared, shooting out of the gully at a point somewhat further down, and riding as though he would graze past them and go on to the ranch. He managed his mustang by the knees, and shot with either hand.

The first thought of Dobbs was to pull trigger. Then he waited.

It looked very much as though this might be a game, played to suit the strength of his hand. The red-skins might mistake this man for him. There had been just about time for him to have run down to the point at which his newly found ally had emerged, and it would not be a hard stretch of imagination for the Apaches to believe that one, who, on foot, was willing to crawl away like a wounded snake, in the saddle would be quite a different man. They knew how it was with themselves. He simply wished he had kept on down the gulch instead of turning at bay; and wondered whether it was too late to try it now.

Then, in the solitary rider he believed that he recognized Partridge.

The ruse, if ruse it was, was a daring one; but it did not work. The Indians attended strictly to the business they had in hand. If they slackened their horses, and fired a few shots at the man lying low in his saddle, they then kept on for the game they had originally started. For his risk he had not gained Dobbs more than a minute of time.

Yet that minute was everything.

Another horseman came darting up the gulch, and he heard the low cry:

"This way, Ike. Where are you?"

Dobbs rose up and tottered toward the newcomer.

"Hyar yer be, Cap. Ef yer want me take me; but be durned quick in the doin' ov it. Thar ain't a big show left."

With the same ease that he had shown when seeking to assist Mercedes Burton, for he it was, the horseman flung the wounded man on the saddle in front of him and dashed on.

"Grunt and bear it, old man. We never went back on a pard yet, and we wouldn't go back on you," he cried. "If you can hold together, and stick to a horse when we put you there, we'll chase them yet. We've got a mount for you back here a bit, and when we find we can't run away there will be just the liveliest, sweetest kind of a fight you ever read about. There's a million of the red devils on the prairie, and more arising. You can't sling a bullet so it will go wrong and we'll pile up hair like haystacks. Here we are. Jim has made the rifle; and there's our side pard with your mustang. Take a snort of this; and we'll draw off till we find out how you feel."

He had been talking in the hope of keeping Isaac's mind away from his own ailments. Now he thrust the mouth of a pocket flask between the lips of his burden, and let a goodly portion of the ardent run down the throat that was ready to receive it.

"Ah!" said Ike, drawing a long breath as he straightened himself up. "That makes a feller a new man. Whar's yer hoss-flesh? They're gainin' on us now, but when I git in ther saddle we'll show 'em heels."

"Steady then, and there you are."

Together the four dashed away with a whole flock of pursuers streaming in their rear.

"Blaze away!" shouted Ike, on whom the brandy had had a surprising effect; and as he spoke he fired a shot over his shoulder.

"Ther hounds kin howl; but they can't shoot worth a cent."

"Don't you fool yourself on that," grimly muttered Partridge, as he came alongside. "They can shoot like a house afire. I'm hit in five places! Luck is on our side so far, that's all; and it's the only thing we've got to tie to. The whole nation seems to be out."

Luck was on their side indeed, since it was largely by chance that they were all well mounted; and between hard shooting and good riding could, for a time, hold their own.

Yet there was no chance for hide-and-seek; no natural advantage from which they could hopefully make a stand; and in their rear by this time were streaming a score or more—too many to beat off—and more to come up.

Not a very hopeful outlook for the four, as, with set teeth and the glare of the fire at their backs, they butted their way into the darkness—yet saw a dozen waiting forms appear suddenly in their path.

CHAPTER XXXII.

WHEN ROGUES FALL OUT.

HAD one of the Americans—who shot by instinct and counted the odds afterward—been with the Donna, her capture might not have been so readily made. A snap shot or two from men who were never at a loss, and an engagement might have been precipitated, out of which there would have been at least a chance to escape alive.

The Don, however, was unwilling to run the risks—or even to drop a red-skin, to make sure of evading capture.

For this he had more reasons than one, especially after he knew for a surety who was the leader of his captors. He listened in silence to Mercedes bargaining for his life, and did not darken counsel by words without wisdom, yielding doggedly, and suffering himself to be disarmed without remonstrance.

It was evident that Alfredo had his dusky followers well under control, since not a dissenting voice seemed to be raised as he shortly ordered an immediate departure. There were a few stealthy glances at the glare in the distance, but the little war-party moved away without a single straggle. There could be but little of doubt that they were going to some appointed rendezvous, and though there was caution in the rapidity with which they moved, there was very little expectation of meeting a foe in the road.

Nor was their progress interrupted; though the Donna was tired enough before, with something of a shudder she put her hand upon Alfredo's as he put it up to swing her out of the saddle.

They had reached the spot at which the camp for the night was to be made. Where it was, and of what nature were its surroundings, Mercedes knew little, and cared less. She was ready to drop down almost anywhere, and between danger and fatigue her spirit seemed in a fair way to break down. She refused an offer of the flask of Destajo, and sunk without a word to the ground. Ramon, as a prisoner, eyed his guard with a confidence that had a reason behind it, while Alfredo sat moodily apart, looking more like a captive than any of them.

A short time before he had been willing to run any risks for this chance. Now that he had it he saw Four Claw in the distance, and was not half as happy over it as he had expected. There was a distance between him and the Donna that he had not realized. And there was the matter of the men who had been taken with Mercedes.

He had looked after the Don and the Donna;

but the rest had escaped his mind. Now they had dropped out of sight as well, and he cared not to ask questions, nor to examine whether any fresh scalps hung in the girdles of his followers.

An hour or two passed. Destajo had not stirred—he was too deeply immersed in thought. Mercedes had not stirred—she had fallen into too deep a slumber.

Then Four Claw came.

The chief looked even grimmer than usual as he glared around, his eyes falling upon the silent group, and finally resting upon Ramon.

"Humph!" he said, and strode forward. The sound aroused both Destajo and Mercedes. They looked up in time to see that he had placed his hand in that of Estvan; who grasped it with a cordial pressure.

"The vile old wolf!" muttered Alfredo. "I am half Apache, and would have been true to him to the end, yet he gives me up for that traitor who has played him false a dozen times. He has befooled me through all. If I dared I would slay him where he stands, yet it would only bring death to them all, and Mercedes shall not be harmed."

Very true it was that though the warriors had followed him without hesitation, and obeyed his commands, yet at the slightest sign from Four Claw they would be just as willing to turn and rend him.

It was not hard to understand the gleam of triumph in the eyes of the Don. He knew all this; and after the first movement of the great war-chief he was satisfied that it rested with himself whether the old-time cordiality between them should be renewed. If he was willing to forgive, Four Claw was perfectly willing to forget the events of the night.

"Ah," said the Don, holding the dusky pack of bones in his hand.

"Four Claw has learned the mistake, and how he was tricked and fooled. It is well. Great harm has it done to Ramon Estvan; but what of that? Better to lose it all than the friendship of the most illustrious war-chief of the Apaches. Say nothing more. Once more we are friends; and the harm is forgotten. The herds of Estvan are safe; and he has much gold laid away. He can build up his burning home, and be as rich as before. No blood of his red brethren is on his hands."

"Don Ramon speak like wise man. Not the fault of Ramon, not the fault of Four Claw. All a mistake. Never doubt him again. What white brother want? Four Claw glad do um. No trust other white brother, and Ramon be his oldest friend."

"Would Don Ramon have squaw?—then him wait."

"All, or none, Four Claw. It will not do for me to go away and leave the rest behind. Some day it might be said I did not do my full duty. Ramon will not leave one of his blood behind him."

"Estvan and his friends are the guests of Four Claw. No harm shall come to them, yet he must wait until his red brethren have said that he can send them on their way. It shall be as he says, yet they must have their say too. Let them rest in peace; to-morrow they shall know that the word of the Apache is no lie."

"Ramon was certain that it was a mistake, and he sought to flee from his red brethren until they could know the truth. He trusts his brethren, but he did not trust the man with a white face and a black heart, that tries to claim the Apaches as brethren. He is afraid of him even now, while his hands are tied from defending himself. Will Four Claw stand between him and the Death Spider, who would crawl and strike him if he saw the chance though a thousand chiefs said no?"

The Don darted a look of intense hatred at Destajo, whose eyes were bent upon the two as he listened to their conversation.

At the charge his face flushed with anger, and he made a hasty step forward.

"Thou knowest that thy words are false. Alfredo Destajo—such is the name under which the world knows him—never harmed a man save in open warfare, and least of all would he do harm to thee. If he has taken thee prisoner it was to prevent the wrong that thou wouldest have done, and have thine own double-dealing fall upon thine own head. Yet, to save Mercedes it were best not to push me too far. She is sacred from thy touch, even if it must be at the cost of thy life. Beware how thou seekest to barter for her."

"Thou wouldest harm me or any one else that stood as I stand, between thee and thy wishes. I trust thee not since I know the object thou hadst in view, and for which I shame to say I thought thou hadst the aid of the great war-chief whose unworthy servant thou art. If thou wouldest deny let Four Claw say what it wouldest have him to do for thee when he and his band moved toward the Ranch of the Seven Saints."

"Thou and I each sought the aid of Four Claw, and to thee was his confidence given. Destajo has nothing more to say."

With all the dignity that belongs to an Indian chief, Alfredo wrapped his cloak around him and stalked away from the spot, without waiting for

the answer of the Don, or the interruption that Four Claw was about to make.

"Let um go," muttered the chief. "Um good boy now, make good man, bym-bye, soon. Sulk little now, be all right 'morrow. Promise um heap, next time. Can't go 'gainst old friend. He all right; 'nother time do all for him. Waugh!"

Ramon did not seem to agree with the chief in regard to the pliability of Destajo; but there was nothing to do but shake his head and wait for the end to justify his belief, even at his own expense. Nevertheless, a moment later, he darted a triumphant glance at Mercedes, who had been listening in silence.

As her face did not express any decided feeling, he ventured to approach her.

"Thou seest that there has been some wild mistake, for which I blame yon young renegade most of all. Between Four Claw and Estvan has been vowed peace for years, and the chief would not be the one to break it. Thy interests are as mine, as I may show him. Fear not. But for the Americanos no trouble would there have been; to them and Destajo be the blame."

Mercedes appeared to have lost much of her courage. She cowered back, and answered wearily:

"As thou wilt. To-night I have no strength even to hope. When morning comes I may see things clearer. Yet I can scarce believe that the young Destajo is what he seems, a renegade. There have been more mistakes than one in this matter, and I would that it was all cleared up to my mind. Yet speak no more of it to-night. Let me rest. It will take a clearer head than mine now to understand all the mysteries that I see in it."

"The same would I say. Rest in peace, thy slumbers shall not be disturbed. There is nothing to fear. Thou shalt be left alone, but I will be near at thy call."

Rather gracefully the Don withdrew, taking the arm of the red chief with all the confidence of a friend, and leading him away. If appearances went for anything, they were no longer prisoners—even though they could not get away.

Perhaps the brief slumbers of the Donna had refreshed her more than she had admitted. She closed her eyes as the two left her, but it was not to sleep.

"There is more of tragedy than farce in the play they have been acting," she thought to herself. "The words of the young man were too earnestly spoken not to have much of truth in them. They are *all* my foes—I can trust none. If I could escape, it would be long before I would trust myself to the tender care of Don Estvan again. Yet, for the present, I must seem to hold him my friend, since I can find no other. I shall pay him all the more certainly in the end the debt I owe him."

Yet as she spoke so hopelessly, she looked around to see what more she could learn of the camp, and whether she was as unguarded as she seemed.

And then she heard her name softly whispered; and a caution. From the darkness in the rear, Destajo had stealthily approached, and now was extending to her the hope that a moment before she had thought was not for her.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

RAMON GETS EVEN.

MERCEDES was all caution. No need was there to warn her that her speech had best be guarded and her actions such that they would not attract attention. If this was an honest attempt to aid her it was made at some risk, and if it was only part of the treacherous game that had all along been played, she would not run any needless risk.

No one watched her—alone there was no danger that she would or could pass the guard set a little further out. She had only to wait and listen when Alfredo had wormed his way a little closer.

"If thou wouldst trust thyself to Don Ramon, in any event, I have nothing to say. But if thou art not ready to give thyself into his arms, then I would save thee—not for myself, but because I love thee."

"I trust not to either Ramon or thee, but Ramon least of the two. Both have played the villain, if what has been said is truth, and his hand wins. He cannot hoodwink me. Long ago I knew him as he is, yet for reasons of my own preserved a seeming friendship. Of thee I knew little and cared less. Yet if thou canst help me, that much will be gratefully remembered, though I see thy face no more. After what I have this night learned thou couldst not expect more."

"True, and yet I swear to thee that I am not as guilty as thou mayest think. I have given thee up now, since doubly have I been betrayed; still I may save thee for thyself if thou hast the strength and the will to run the risk. It can scarcely be the worse for thee; and if we succeed I hope for but that grateful remembrance of which thou hast spoken. Wilt thou trust me so far?"

"For any effort that may seem to have a chance of success behind it I am ready. But not a step do I move until thou hast placed a

weapon in my hand. If thou hast a mind then to try to play me false, beware. At the first sign of it I slay thee."

"It shall be as thou sayest. I would not ask for further trust than that. Come. It may be that I will fail; but if it was truth that I heard, as they spoke to each other, then the way will be open for a little, and thou canst follow without fear of being seen. They will not watch thee—for a time at least. Here is the weapon that thou hast required of me. If I fail thee—shoot!"

He was almost within arm's-length of her now, and he held out the revolver that but a few hours before he had taken from her unresisting fingers.

She caught it from him with a scarcely suppressed exclamation of delight, and was ready to follow anywhere, since, as he had said, her case could not well be worse.

Their conversation had been in whispers. In front of the little *cul-de-sac* in which Mercedes had been left the warriors lay. Behind and on two sides was the wall of rock, which she could scarce scale unaided; and on the crest was a watchful sentinel. In what direction were they to move? How had Alfredo evaded those on guard, though not so close as to be seen from the spot where Mercedes had been lying.

He solved the question without trouble. The guard above was one of his own men, that he had put there with his own instructions before Four Claw had found his way to the camp. Past him it would be no trouble to go. While the chief and Ramon were holding a consultation, a little apart, this way of escape was open. Afterward it might be closed.

Together the two climbed slowly up the side of the *cul-de-sac*; and, without a word to the Apache, who, on his part, was just as silent, began skirting along the crest of the ridge. It was part of Alfredo's plan to thus get beyond the Indians, before descending to the plain.

Silently they made their way, and though the road was rough, it was safe; since no sign of the Indians did they meet with. In half an hour they had traveled a mile, and won their way back to the plain.

They found there a mustang picketed, and to it Mercedes was led.

"There is a means of escape for you," Alfredo said, as he placed the rein in her hand. "Thou wouldst hardly care to trust thyself could I go with thee. One way is as safe, perhaps, as another, but yonder is the route to thy home. It is yet in the hands of thy servants, and with the assistance of the Americans thou canst make a stout defense. Reach it if thou canst; trust not in the padre; and remember Alfredo as kindly as thou canst."

"But what is to become of thee? It will be known that thou hast assisted in my escape, and Four Claw is none too much thy friend. I would not take my life so surely at the expense of thine."

"Let Four Claw strike if so he wills," responded Alfredo, moodily. "There is little now to live for, and it will be at his own flesh and blood—at least, the same blood, in part, flows in the veins of Alfredo as in his."

The Donna could not repress a little cry of astonishment.

"True it is," he continued. "The great Apache chief's daughter was my mother. I have nothing to hope for now, so I fear not to speak all the truth. When I add that Ramon Estvan is my father, what more can shame have to say?"

The revelation so briefly made was startling indeed, and for the moment Mercedes had nothing to answer.

Perhaps her silence was wrongly interpreted, for when Alfredo continued it was in a harsher tone:

"Why trouble thee with that which will only bring still more thy scorn upon my head? Away! It is death for thee to linger here. Thou art mounted and armed, and hast looked thy last upon Destajo. Farewell."

He swung her lightly into the saddle, and struck the mustang upon the shoulder so sharply that it gave a great plunge and was away.

Away! but not for good.

There was a sound of a crushing blow, and Alfredo fell like a log in his tracks; while half a dozen Apaches sprung up around the Donna, and Four Claw himself, swinging upon the back of the mustang, flung his arms about her from behind, pinioning her tightly in his grasp.

"Ugh!" he said, with a savage snarl. "Rococo, Ramon, Alfredo—all go back on Four Claw. Now he be him own friend. All want squaw—Four Claw keep squaw himself. What say Ramon? Him come as Apache friend, him stay as Apache friend; but Four Claw keep the girl all herself."

Ramon was there, and as dumfounded at the new turn that affairs had taken, yet ready with his tongue.

"I trust the word of my red brother; and stay in his camp, at least, till daylight. If he cannot give up the Donna, it must he as he says."

Back to the camp went Mercedes, and this time there was no loop-hole to be left for escape. Alfredo was securely bound, the Don was watched as though a prisoner; and to make

sure of everything, when the Donna was once more in the *cul-de-sac*, and the Don resting not far from her, Four Claw threw himself down before them, and evidently meant to keep them under his own eyes until morning.

Not a word more was said. The men were silent, the Donna was dazed from fright, and grimly the night wore on.

A strange savage was this chief of the Apaches. At times no better than the worst of his race; again, speaking and acting in a way that bespoke a closer acquaintance with civilization than would be expected from one in his position. Perhaps he had all the baser traits of three races, and very few of their virtues.

At all events he had plenty of courage, and no end of belief in himself. The Don was no mere child, either in war or in peace, and after the events of the night was hardly to be trusted, yet Four Claw evidently had no fear of him. When some hours had passed in silence, and the break of morning was not far off, the red chief had closed his eyes, and was slumbering heavily.

The Donna had been sleeping fitfully. From one of her light naps she was awakened by a slight rustle near her. She opened her eyes and saw the Don crawling carefully toward Four Claw. There was little light, but she divined his purpose, and her heart stood still with horror. She could see the slaughter of a hand to hand fight unmoved, but this was assassination. If her tongue had not refused to answer to the commands of her will, she would have screamed aloud a warning, little cause as she had to pity the red chief.

It was only for an instant, but in that she heard the noise of a heavy blow and the sound of a gurgling gasp, and the faintest of struggles. With the knife he had held in his hand, the Don had struck home once and then grasped the Apache by the throat. There was no cry, no groan, no continued fight—only the cruel grip on the throat, and what seemed to be death.

It was over in a moment, and Ramon, rising to his knees, glared around to see if there was any witness to his deed. At the same time his lips moved and fashioned the words:

"That for thy villainous treachery. Thou hast burned my home, ruined my life, and now would take Mercedes. If death comes for it, I have had my revenge."

Then he caught a glimpse of the crouching figure, and somehow imagined the terror that was in her eyes. He crawled toward her with a warning hiss:

"Not a word, on thy life. It was his or thine, and I have saved thee."

"Yes, assassin, for a worse slaughter. When this deed is known, no mercy will there be for thee or for me."

"There is time enough and to spare. They trust me in spite of the play that thou hast seen, and I can open the way for escape. See that thou art silent. I will not leave thee long."

With a wondrous courage, he went out alone, leaving Mercedes with the two motionless bodies, the one bound with cords beyond motion, the other bound with something stronger.

Would Ramon return? That was the question that first occurred to Mercedes when she saw that he was fairly gone. If he did not, then her life would certainly be the forfeit if found there with the corpse of the chief. She shuddered, felt faint, and then braced herself to meet the emergency.

The knife was still in the breast of Four Claw. She crept to it, drew it out, and cut the bands that bound Destajo. So quietly had everything been done, that it was only the touch of her hand that aroused him from his heavy sleep.

He stared around him in a bewildered sort of way. Something had happened, of course, but what?

He had hardly time to ask the question, since, as he sprung to his feet, Mercedes rushed out from the mouth of the prison pen. She had heard a noise that gave her a thrill of hope. The scurry of hoofs sounded from the plain, and then the rattle of fire-arms.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AROUND AS USUAL.

THE Donna had no plan in view—no particular hope of rescue—but in the excitement outside, it was possible she might be able to steal away somewhere, and hide. Certainly she did not believe that it was anything more than a chance collision, or that any force that would be wandering there would be sufficiently strong to cope with the Apaches. Probably it was a few of the fugitives from the ranch of Estvan, that had stumbled into the Apache lines. How long they would last, remained to be seen.

Yet hardly had Mercedes made her appearance from the mouth of the natural corral where Four Claw had been herding his prisoners, when a hand grasped her arm nervously, and she was hurried away.

"This way," said the voice of the Don, low and husky.

Unable to resist, and utterly bewildered, she suffered herself to be dragged away. Whither he was taking her, or what fate had next in store for her, was more than she even guessed. The dashing Donna was so completely broken up, that she shut her eyes and ran blindly.

"If we dared wait," muttered Ramon. "They may win, yet, before that, we should be slain. War is it, to the knife, and the knife to the hilt, between Estvan and the Apaches. And those coming may be but little better. We must hide and hope."

"Excuse me!"

With a sudden burst of speed, a horseman darted to their side.

The whole attack had been a complete surprise; and this was as much so as any part of it.

The new-comer was Burton. Following him were a dozen or more, who galloped, and pistol-ed, and shouted with the most reckless abandon; and uttered a shrill hurrah of triumph, as, darting past the Apaches, who had sprung to their horses, they saw their leader with Mercedes in his arms.

The temporary victory, such as it was, had been soon and easily won. Four Claw had sought the camp with but a few followers, leaving the main body behind him, so that the force that Burton charged was composed almost entirely of the braves who had followed Destajo. Without a leader, and with half a dozen down, they were in no mood for instant pursuit of the phantoms that came, bit hard, and then were away.

"Thank heaven, I was in time!" was Burton's exclamation, cheerfully given.

"I thought once or twice we were on the wrong trail; but Tomasso said not: and though he is a servant of the Don he is a devil of a trailer, and we stuck to him as the best we could do. This time you *shall* go home. Jim is behind there, and he has a dozen men with him that don't make a bad show at fighting when they have a man of sand to handle them. Have no fear. The great gang of the thieves is in the rear. You poor, little lamb. The wind has been blowing roughly enough in your direction. But the storm was bound to come if you waited long enough. It was lucky that we were here to help you weather it."

He talked to the woman who lay quivering in his arms, even though she gave no sign that she heard him. He wanted to recall her to herself, and hope; and by and by he was successful. When he had rattled on a little longer she even spoke.

"I have had enough of adventure for once. More could not be borne. If I reach home in safety I shall leave it as soon as it can be done. I would never dare or care to live there again."

"Not alone, of course. But it is a wondrously pleasant place when one gets to know it; and these neighbors of yours might be held off, with me as captain of your body-guard. I would willingly live the rest of my life here. What think you?"

"Would you?"

The voice of the Donna was dreamy and thoughtful.

"Would I not? It is worth your while to think of it. With me—"

"An' me too, pard. Don't furgit Sodder Si. He's got a applicashun in fur 'bout ther same job, an' it's takin' a onfair advantedge fur you ter be pressin' yer claim this time er night. Ther leddy orter hev daylight ter choose in. Then she could see a man, when she knewed him."

The irrepressible vagabond was around again; and Burton greeted his appearance with a blessing that he found it best to ignore.

"Oh, I knowed yer would be glad ter see me ag'in. Ef yer didn't hev yer arms full I'd say, shake, old pard, fur ther sake ov what hes bin, an' ther chanc't ov what's ter come."

"To thunder with your palaver. Why arn't you back with the boys in the ruck? Some time you'll be just a shade too friendly and somebody will drop. I reckon the somebody will be you."

"Don't be too rapid. Sodder Si hez come ter stay. I've bin talkin' off an' on, givin' you a show fur what you done fur me; but now I mean biz from ther go. To-morrer I'll get my answer frum ther charmin' widder, an' hyar's stamps ez sez I stay."

At the first sound of his voice Mercedes had straightened herself to listen. Now she drooped again in Burton's arms, a smile on her lips.

"With two such friends I might have some trouble to choose; but with four or five the puzzle becomes alarming. You are forgetting your friends, are you not, Mr. Burton? You are all in on the ground floor, are you not? Share and share alike."

It took more than that to abash the Handsome Sport.

"Oh, for that matter, Partridge has a share in the bonanza; Charley can see no one but the gentle Luilla, and so I am left free to offer—"

"A ch'ice betwixt Sodder Si an' you. Good ernuf; but don't answer him now; I'll see you all later. I jist thort I'd call yer attenshun to the fact that I war on ther carpet. So long, now; I'll see yer both later. An' remember that that's no funny work in this; but all squar'biz."

He dropped back as suddenly as he had come, and the next moment Ike Dobbs came galloping up with a led horse.

"We're hyar, senora; an' glad ter match anything they weigh in, from three pounds ter a

'shake.' Glad ter see yer so bloom'in'. Ole Ike's kinder moultin' like, an' off his feed; but he'll stick till ther heels drop off. Ef you kin do it, I'd say yer better crawl on this yere hoss. We're jist hanging back now; but ef you war mounted we could kim up, an' pelt along for all that's out. Ef they come fur keeps two on a hoss wouldn't hev much show ter keep outen ther drag."

"Thanks, Isaac. You shall not be forgotten. When hope came back my strength came with it; and I will feel more at home in the saddle—thanking Mr. Burton, all the same. No, do not prevent me. I am stronger than you think, and I would just as soon put a little more distance between you and your folly."

Burton would have prevented her, but she slipped from his arms, mounted without assistance, and settled into her seat with a strength he did not really think she possessed.

After that the retreat for the ranch went on in earnest, and there was not much chance for Burton to urge his claims.

The night had well worn away and daylight came as they neared the Seven Saints.

So far there had been no sign of pursuit, but the time of trial was at hand.

With what force would they find the ranch beleaguered?

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE WORTH OF A WOMAN.

"POOR fellows," said Kenyon, meditatively looking down upon a brace of corpses. "They kept their promise only too well. The 'Pash are in desperate earnest, as they always are; and I guess I have saved my hair—well, by the skin of my teeth. I don't fancy the new element, though, that Rocodo has been trying to bring in. I've heard a little of Red Rod. If he *should* go solidly for the ranch—why, he can shoot about as straight as I can. I'm afraid the fun will begin to slop over. And now to get back. It was such very plain sailing coming out, that like as not it will be a very tight squeeze getting in. Here goes, anyhow."

When there was need for it Kenyon went into danger as recklessly as any of them; when he could take his time he generally preferred to go around it.

He faced toward the ranch and scanned the plain earnestly. Then he turned half-way around in his saddle, thrusting forward a pistol as he turned, and took a snap shot that hit its mark with the certainty of fate.

Only he was a shade too late.

As the report of his revolver rang out upon the night air the noose of a lasso dropped over his head and down around his shoulders, and the shot that had flung the rider cold had startled the animal he bestrode, sending him off like a whirlwind.

From his saddle Kenyon was torn and dragged away in a horrible race by the riderless horse, that scarcely felt the weight that hung at the end of the lasso that trailed from the saddle-horn.

Around in the darkness one cry after another arose, and there was a scurry of hoofs toward the spot; but darting out of the shadows came two riders, nearer by far than all the rest, who held straight for the flying steed, gaining at every stride.

"A moment, senorita," cried one of the riders, a midget that was scarcely visible as he lay along his horse's neck. "Keep from my way. I may save him, if it be the American senor."

He shot ahead as he spoke, gained at every stride, was abreast of the runaway, leaned far over and gave a sweeping stroke with the keen blade he held in his hand.

The lariat parted with a twang, and Kenyon lay in a huddled little heap on the plain. Such a race, if long continued, could have ended only in death. The question was, whether it had ceased in time.

Thinking only of the man at her feet, Luilla sprung to the ground, and raised his head upon her arm.

Kenyon was limp and motionless, but not dead.

"Thank Heaven that I brought thee when I stole out, after finding Miguel's corpse, to see what harm might have befallen him. He will be doubly thy friend after this. Help me. We must get him on my mustang before they come."

Her companion was the boy who has figured only as Jehosophat.

He shook his head sagely at the appeal.

"Can I lift a mountain? When I have grown a year or two it may be of use to ask it. We can tarry here till my strength comes. If the Apaches raise not our hair meantime, we may then carry him away. Let us leave him here and ride sharply off. They will follow us and not find him. If his neck be broken it will make no difference; if it be not, he will come to himself and get out of harm's way."

"Too late!" cried Luilla, looking at the dark forms that were closing in around her.

"Down!" exclaimed the boy, catching her arm and suddenly drawing her to the ground. As she half fell, half sunk, there was a rattle and rush, a chorus of shouts that scarcely came from either Mexican or Apache throats

and a dozen men swept by, charging against the scattered line that was coming on to meet them. By some strange chance here were friends, just at hand.

When Kenyon came to himself he was first and foremost conscious that he had a good many bones in his body; and that all of them seemed to be broken.

Next, he knew that he was back in the ranch, and Luilla was near by, watching him. Daylight was streaming in through the window, and beyond, through the house there was turmoil enough to have aroused the seven of Collogne.

"What has happened?"

He had muttered and mumbled before, in a wandering way; but now he spoke with his senses all about him. Luilla leaned eagerly forward.

"How can I tell? Just in time a dozen terrible strangers came. Perhaps they saved our lives—and perhaps, better would it have been for us to have died. They cut a way through the Apaches, and carried thee as they went. They are all here now; and if they pillaged not the place, on sight, it was because they were too busy broaching the wine they rolled from the signora's cellars. If ever thou hast heard of Red Roderique's rustlers thou knowest into what hands we have fallen."

"None worse in the country. And the Apaches: are they still near?"

"In the distance. They seem to have sent out couriers. No doubt when reinforcements come the war will begin again."

"What is that? They are leaving the house. Something must have happened. Help me up. From the window I can see what there is in the wind. And where are my revolvers? I cannot promise to carry you out of danger; but if you stay where I can aid you I swear no danger shall come nigher you."

Luilla smiled in spite of herself at the generous offer.

"Wait a little longer with your promises, till the danger seems more pressing. They are going away. See. The Indians have gathered from the plain. There are at least a hundred of them. They turn and move away."

"Yes, against those you see coming beyond them. It is the Donna as I am a sinner. No mercy for her now if she falls into their hands. My horse! I must be in at the death if it takes a limb or two off."

He staggered up, gave one more glance through the window, then stumbled out to the *patio*. There were saddled steeds there, and to the amazement of Luilla, who had followed, sometimes even supporting him, he climbed into a saddle and recklessly dashed away. If she had followed the promptings of her instincts just then, she would have gone with him, but common sense got the better of her courage. She went back into the building, and roused up some of the retainers that had been hiding their heads when the rustlers, bursting in with Luilla and her charge, had taken full possession.

Upon the whole they feared the men of Red Rod rather more than they did the Apaches. They had not yet carried their pillaging further than the larder, but then the time had been scant. If they made up their minds to clean up the house, what hope was there of being able to say them nay?

Luilla mustered a dozen not very valiant soldiers. The best of the men were away on the plain, and with these she could hope to do nothing outside of the defenses. She woke up their courage a little, drove them to the spots where they could do the most good; and then had time to look out and see how the battle was going.

The Apaches had ridden for the little party that surrounded Mercedes like mad. There were enough of them to ride the Donna down by sheer force of weight, and the least sign of hesitancy and they would have done so. Mercedes saw them coming, but had had fair warning of the movement, and was in the hands of men who knew no fear. Besides that, away in the distance to the rear she and they could see a dim line of pursuers, that they knew were the forces of Four Claw from the ranch of the Don, and hot for revenge. Before they came it would be well to find some cover that might serve as a rallying-place.

The little knot gathered somewhat closely around the Donna, and with the four Americans to the front, sent their well-tired horses along at their full speed. As yet they did not know of the dubious aid that was coming from the ranch, and trusted solely to their own courage and skill.

The Apaches had tasted of the mettle of the rustlers the night before, and would want as little more of them as was possible until they had finished up the affair with the Donna; yet they could not bring themselves to a steady charge, when the chances were so much safer by a little delay. At the last moment they broke away from a hand-to-hand meeting, trusting to the superior freshness of their mustangs to fall upon front, flank and rear at the same time.

The moment of delay was of more than moment. It gave the rustlers time to get well up, and the Donna and her friends never checked

their speed, but darted right on, even faster than before, shooting as they came.

There were a great many of the Apaches well armed, and more of them whose weapons were lance and bow. The latter were scarcely in range, as they broke away; yet there was a very hot fire going now; and men began to drop on both sides. At long range in the open field it would only have been a question of time. The Indians would lose two or three to one, and then have enough, if they were set for revenge, and had the sand to stay.

Yet the sight of a couple of falling Mexicans gave them courage, and with a chorus of yells they suddenly drove in from all sides.

As fate would have it, it was the worst move they could have made; but Four Claw was not there, and the rage of battle carried them away. They came at once into the range of four braces of revolvers that had hitherto been silent. Eight hands were up and shooting, while the Mexicans fought like caged tigers.

Mercedes closed her eyes and reeled in her saddle when the crash came. She could hear the spiteful bark of the revolvers, the sharp crack of the rifles, the shrill war-cries of the Indians, and the cheers of her own adherents; but her own strength and courage seemed all gone; she swayed more and more, and at last would have fallen had there been no help at hand. Burton was busy, and so were the rest of them. It seemed to her that no one cared to aid her. With a low cry she threw up her hands.

"Sodder Si's 'round, purty. When he don't turn up yer kin jedge ther hull outfit's played, an' it's time ter go under ther daisies."

He came with a rush, caught her as she reeled, and driving his spurs deep, darted straight toward the knot of a dozen men that was bursting through the Apaches, slaughtering on either side as they came.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

FIRE AND FALL BACK.

"ABOUT face, and fall back to the ranch! Here's something must be in safety first; we'll settle with the red-birds and the rest afterward. Rustlers, away!"

Sharp and clear the words rung out on the morning air, and they were followed by a cheer. As one man the rustlers wheeled, their revolvers still spitting fire, and sweeping away the Apaches that had been swinging in upon their rear, they dashed back upon their trail. Mercedes was in their very midst, a wall of human forms around her, and her foes were falling away from the deadly hands that were guarding her. Each hand held a revolver, and every shot was certain death.

Burton saw the movement a moment after it was begun.

He would have sprung to her side had it been possible; but the fight was too warm, the intervening horsemen too many. He did half turn the muzzle of his smoking revolver toward Sodder Si, as he felt the thrill of a mad impulse to shoot; but before even his quick finger could draw trigger he was himself again.

"Let him go," he muttered. "He is a better man than most, and there's a big enough contract on hand without wringing in one with him. After the frolic will be time enough. But I'll have an eye on him, and if he doesn't mean it square we'll settle it now."

Only an instant he gave to thought. The rustlers were sheering off in a body, as fair warning had been given that they would. The little knot of men whom Burton led found a thinner place in the Apache ranks. There was a madder rush than ever; shots, blows, and curses; a Hades of fire and smoke; and then the Apaches swung away from their front, and the road was open to the ranch!

Every Mexican embraced the opportunity and rode in line for the Seven Saints.

Four Americans drew rein a little, and abated their speed, to see why the battle slackened around them. Partridge, with an arrow in his shoulder, blood on his face, smarting from half a dozen wounds, and his clothes riddled with bullets, was coolly recharging his revolvers.

"That's it," said Haven. "Bet yer checks they think we've got Four Claw an' are goin' fur ther gal ter trade—er some sick. An', by ther big hand, they've got her!"

While they looked the horse of Sodder Si went down, an arrow feather deep in his side, and the two riders rolled to the ground.

What was taking place after that was veiled from the eager eyes of the Americans by the swoop of the Apaches, but they knew their place was there and spurred into the fray as recklessly as though the odds were all the other way. The rustlers had turned, too, and were coming back with a whoop. Again there was an acre of pandemonium, with something a little worse than purgatory on the outskirts, as a hundred men closed in for a hand-to-hand fight.

And then, by more of their marvelous luck, unharmed, two persons slipped out from the center of it—and one of them was Mercedes.

"Ware hawk!" shouted Burton. "Our turn this time. The Donna is safe; and, by the Rockies, it's Charley Kenyon that's got her. Close up, and cover his line."

There was no need for the order. The others

followed him as he went, and eight revolvers were speaking.

Then the Apaches whirled, Haven hung forward on his horse's neck, Burton gave a start and a shiver, while the mustang of Dobbs fell in a heap.

If they had meant it the red-skins could have called the turn for all the Sharps had in bank.

Instead, they swirled away, shooting and shouting as they went.

"The dog-gonest fight on record," said Partridge coolly. "I should consider that the sooner we get under cover the bigger the chance to repair damages. Are you hurt bad, Billy?"

"Not as many holes as a skimmer, and not too big to plug with a bed-quilt; but I can make a fair show considering. Look after Ike, if it's in the wood. When we git I reckon the copper-colored cherubims will be back after hair. I'd like to disappoint them. May be I can help. This is fun by the cord."

"He's all right—tough as leather. By rights he ought to have been dead ten hours ago. Here, Ike; catch on. We're off for the ranch."

Dobbs had gathered himself up in a mystified way. That he hung together at all was a wonder; but there was a depth of game in the old man that brought him to the scratch every time, and he muttered:

"Cut to ther rattles, but they can't count this chicken out. That's it. Drive on. When I let go cut off my heels an' throw me outen ther pit; while I'm livin' I'll stay."

He had caught hold of Burton's stirrup leather and went off at a rapid trot. Haven braced himself again, and they all kept up the retreat, leaving the rustlers charging viciously after the fleeing foe.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE ROUND-UP AT THE RANCH.

BACK at the ranch Luilla, who had seen all this furious fighting from her coign of vantage on the roof, came rushing down to meet her friend.

"I'm not given to drinking myself," said Kenyon coldly, as he slid from his horse, his late weakness seemingly all gone; "but I think that a little brandy is the one thing needed here now. If the Donna has a nerve that is not unstrung she's a more than mortal woman, and the rest of us are pretty much all broke up. There's no real harm done," he continued, as Luilla uttered a cry of dismay, "but there's a powerful sight of bracing up needed; and I don't believe the war is over yet."

"Hold her a moment, then, if you can; you shall have what you need."

There was no lack of vinous accommodations at the Seven Saints, as the rustlers had discovered. Luilla was gone but a moment, and when she returned she held a bottle in each hand. In that time, too, she had steadied her own nerves, and could be as cold and calm as the Sports themselves.

Kenyon had glanced over his shoulder once, and seen that his pards were coming. He did not trouble himself further to protect his rear, but leaving his mustang to take care of itself, he carried Mercedes within.

The face of the Donna was very white, and she said nothing, but evidently her wits were all about her. She held out her hand, and taking the brandy from Luilla, swallowed enough to bring something of the old-time sparkle to her eyes. There was even a smile, if it was an anxious one, upon her lips, as she saw Kenyon paying his attention to the other bottle.

As yet she had not spoken, she had only pressed Luilla's hand in greeting and given a warning glance at some of the female portion of the household that checked the advance in force that they were about to make. Now, she laid her hand lightly on Kenyon's shoulder as she whispered:

"I can never thank you and your friends enough for what you have done; but you must go."

Kenyon looked at her in amazement.

"I have a dozen reasons for it, but when could a woman give one that would satisfy a man? To me they are good ones, and I say you must go. The way will be open for a little, the Seven Saints can protect itself; you will carry with you the good wishes of Mercedes and her household, and that is all you could ever do."

"Thanks, as far as you go; but perhaps you may alter your views as you grow older. I could hardly leave you if I would, and I wouldn't if I could. When you are calmer and stronger, I will have something to tell you. Till then, believe me, I am too very much your friend to take you at your word."

"Then, beware. If you remain, it will be to bring trouble to yourself and me."

"Never. Always, as in the brief past, you will find me ready to protect."

"Please, don't! That was what Mr. Burton said last night in the thickest of the trouble, and the vagabond who has done me such good service, added his postscript of 'me too'!"

"The infernal scoundrel! He is a more dangerous rascal than you think, and I would not leave you here with him around, if for no other

reason. I shall stay here to guard, to protect; and, perhaps, to win—"

"Me too."

Mr. Sodder Si was around again. From out of the heap of slain he had been drawn, comparatively uninjured; and now swaggered in with three-quarters of the late dozen of rustlers at his heels.

"Oh, me princess, I've bin worshipin' at a distance, thinkin' you'd ketch onther fact ov ther duke in disguise. I've bin 'round all ther time, with sand an' soap, but it was all no good. You couldn't see through ther ole man. Now I'll gi'n yer suthin' ter feast yer eyes on. Take yer last chance. Hey, presto! Sodder Si go 'way furever. Come, Red Rod; I'm the King of the Rustlers, Mercedes; will you be their queen?"

While he spoke the tatterdemalion worked a sudden transformation. He slipped his ragged coat away from under his belt, flung it aside with his battered sombrero and shaggy whiskers; and stood revealed, a handsome, broad-shouldered man, with a devil-may-care gleam in his eyes, and his hand on his revolver.

"Hurray fur ther capt'in, boys!" shouted one of his followers. "He's the man ter take a woman's eye; an' we're ther boyees ter take ther ranch."

Three-quarters of a dozen of strong throats joined in a chorus; but Red Rod frowned at the demonstration, and raised his hand, as if to check it.

The motive, no doubt, was a generous one, but it was at his own cost. When he looked around again the smile had actually come back to Kenyon's face, at the reappearance of danger; and both sides of his sack-coat skirt were elevated. He had a brace of derringers there, that had remained undischarged through all the late unpleasantness, and now, though hidden from view, one of them lay in line for Red Rod's heart, while the other menaced the rustlers at large.

"A move and you die," he said, with sudden fierceness. "You observe I have the drop, as customary; and I mean to keep it. Hands up, all, and move out! I'll hold the ranch, by myself if need be; and the man that objects tumbles now."

Red Rod was as cool, and a great deal more venomous.

"Shoot, then. It is your life or mine, and you hold the drop. I swear that when next I hold it no mercy will you know, since you come between me and Mercedes!"

There was a contraction of the brow of Kenyon as he listened to this defiance. Red Rod could have sworn the shot was coming.

Then, with a sudden cry Mercedes sprung forward and between, and catching Kenyon's wrists forced both hands down.

"Hold," she cried. "A shot or a blow at your peril, if I have to slay you myself! I have a word to say, and I may as well say it now. I am no coward, but I can understand the truth as well as the next. Give me your word that you will listen."

"I pass!" responded Kenyon, without the least trace of feeling in his tone. "There are nine of them with the drop on me; and I only held it on two. The chances are not even, and now I prefer not to shoot."

"And since Mercedes has saved my life, I will listen," retorted Red Roderick, quietly returning the pistol that he had just snatched from his belt.

"Good! You will yet be friends again. Listen! I have been driven from my home; I have been half-torn in pieces; I have been rescued and rerecued times without number; I have had enough of it, in the general scramble; I must choose some one to be responsible for my protection, and as I want the best man alive, I choose—you!"

As she spoke, she wheeled suddenly from Kenyon, and advanced with both hands outstretched, toward Red Rod!

"I have had a suspicion for some time," she added, "but now I know: you are Salvador!"

He drew her toward him, and looked at Kenyon.

"Perhaps this gentleman will object to losing Mercedes—and her fortune. If so—and he will pardon me for my late jealous fancies—I'll give him any satisfaction he may desire."

Kenyon was still puzzled; but equal to the occasion.

"Don't be too previous. I don't want Mercedes, though I'll fight for her, or any other woman, on general principles. It is—well, why not tell the truth?—it is Luilla I want; and she and I can settle the question without outside assistance. Still, the proposition might be worth the considering. If you and I start even, we would be sure to kill each other, or both; and that would leave the way open for Buttons. He is the business man of the trio."

"Don't discommode yourself on my account."

Burton was standing just beyond the doorway, and taking it all in. "I can't say that I ever was very enthusiastic; and I wouldn't be second choice anyhow. I guess it's all on the square, so take her and be happy."

"Perhaps, Mr. Partridge may object?"

"Partridge claims to have the big end of an

interest in Ike Dobbs's bonanza; you know all about that. If that's all right here's my hand. If you go back I am ready to fight at the drop of a chip."

"Good enough then! You three saved my life when the Don had me clear up to the ridge of the range. If it hadn't been for you I would have gone over. I said and thought some things then, that I mean now. Of course you understand that I am Salvador, back from abroad. I'll explain it all when I have had a little talk with my wife. Now, boys, away to the outside. I promised you the best in the ranch and I'll keep it when the danger is over, though you and I did not understand it exactly in the same way."

The rustlers greeted the words of their leader with a cheer, and then thronged out. A moment later and the rest were looking over the plain. The Apaches were unexpectedly withdrawing, taking their dead with them.

"Santa Maria, look!" exclaimed Mercedes. "If my eyes have not deceived me, yonder is Four Claw, himself; and that prisoner is the miserable Don."

"I'm sorry for him, then," said Kenyon. "We'll try to get him out of this drag; but I'm afraid we can't make the rifle."

Kenyon's fears were not unfounded. Though only holding back for a more certain blow in the future, the Apaches were off and away; and the rescue of the Don was an impossibility. His fate was never revealed, or how he fell into their hands. Probably he had made his escape to within almost speaking distance of the ranch, and then was recaptured by Four Claw, who had followed hard on his trail after recovering consciousness from the strangling and the stab, that, after all, did not slay. The treachery of the man he had conspired to assist was worse than the blow. He was wild for revenge—and no doubt he had it. There came no claimant for the dead embers of the burned ranch, or the remnants of his scattered herd, and the double plot, by which, doubtless, Ramon was to give the herd of the Donna and take Mercedes, was never entirely unraveled.

After Ramon's act Destajo had nothing more to fear at the hands of his red relative, in whose veins probably flowed as much of the blood of the whites as there was in his own. There was enough known to show that he had escaped, and forsaken those plains where once he would have won Mercedes.

Rocodo, too, was heard of, though in a different garb, and in a lowlier sphere than when he ruled it around the Seven Saints. The Donna in her loneliness had needed a man, and had used him, though, as she knew him better, she began to fear him. He made the mistake of his life when he bargained with Ramon, and backed it up with trying to make another bargain with the supposed rustler. Ramon was cheating him all the time. Had he known of the plot with Four Claw he might have saved himself; as it was he was glad to escape alive.

The story of Salvador sounded like a romance. Of course he had escaped, and kept the fact hidden, even from his wife. He had wandered some, gathered his little band together; and though they were not as bad as their reputation, they had done some wild work on the border, and settled up numerous old scores, before the latest revolution made his home coming politically safe. Then he tested his wife pretty thoroughly, and expressed himself satisfied with the result. When a woman is witty, wealthy, wise and true, what more wanted? She had guarded his possessions well, and even of the lately scattered herd hardly a hoof was lost.

And the rest were all content, even to "Crazy Ike," who was given a good share in the bonanza that Salvador and the Three Handsome Sports found in the ancient mine. It is too soon to say anything of "Jehosophat," since he has not yet reached man's estate, but rest assured that neither he nor Hayden went unrewarded.

And best of all, as he thought, Charley Kenyon got—Luilla. As she and Mercedes were sisters, of American blood, and alike in all things, even to being heiresses, the campaign could hardly be called a failure, when it had reached its

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